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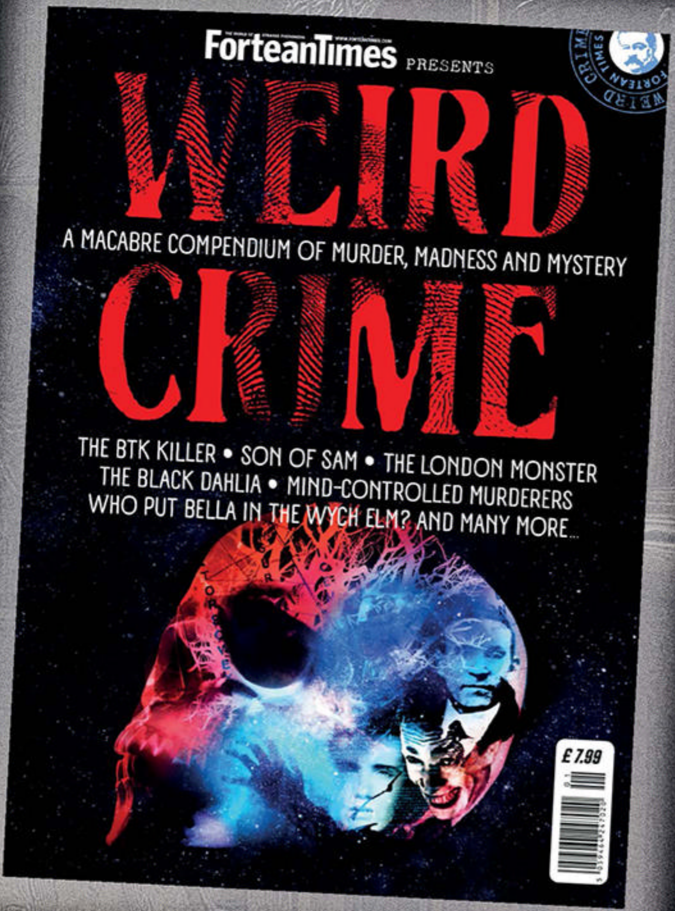
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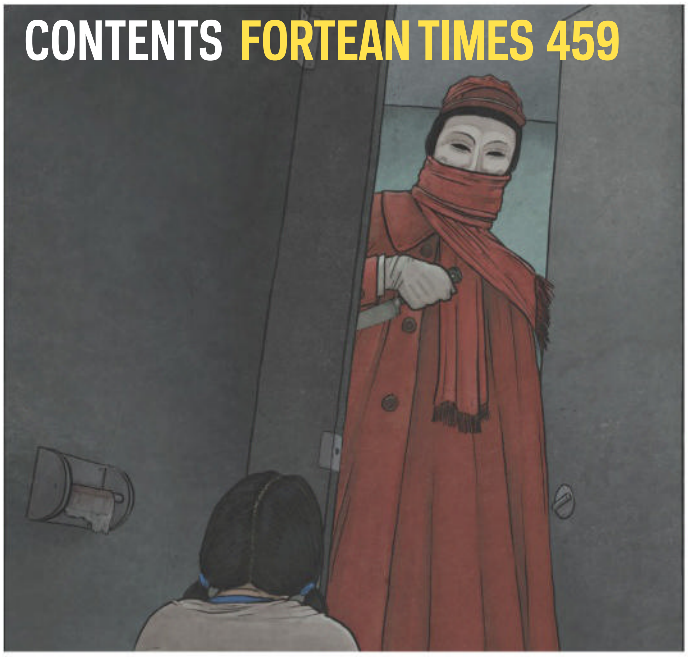
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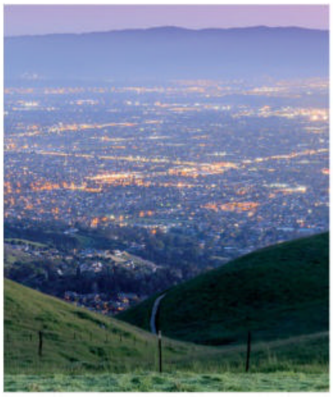
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Thanks to HSIANG-YAO TSENG for modelling on the covers that nearly made it... (these are just unfinished roughs.)

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

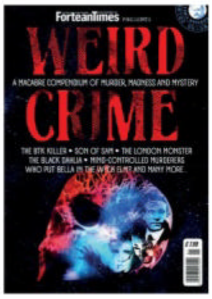
GODS, GHOSTS AND FAIRIES

The Cottingley fairy photographs will be well known to most readers – and to the wider world, thanks to films like *Photographing Fairies* (above) – but even seasoned forteans might be surprised to find that the 1928 second edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's book *The Coming of the Fairies* included further photos supposedly showing the little people (including gnomes) in their natural habitat, taken in locations ranging from Devon to Montreal. In this issue, Alan Murdie dusts off these largely forgotten images and the stories behind them, and asks whether, with the tide of enthusiasm for Spiritualism turning, these late flowerings of fairy photography did more harm than good for Doyle's cause.

From fairies to spirits – and a whole range of other odd entities – as acclaimed weird fiction writer Laura Mauro takes us on a terrifying tour of supernatural Japanese toilet lore – from lavatory gods to bottom-groping ghosts – including helpful tips on how to avoid some of the more malevolent of these lurkers in the loo. Japanese toilet ghosts are part of a rich tradition of stories that have moved from classical folklore to modern urban legend; in the Netherlands, the latter genre has its own striking name: broosjeaapverhaal, or 'ape sandwich stories'. If you're wondering why, then you'll have to read Matt Salusbury's Forum article on this very subject.

CRIMINALLY GOOD!

Don't forget that our new bumper archive collection, *Fortean Times Presents... Weird Crime.* is on sale now. From the horrific murders and cryptic puzzles of the BTK Killer to the mystery of the unidentified man found poisoned on an Australian beach, this special edition re-opens the files on some of the oddest and most baffling crimes. Were the Son of Sam murders part of a Satanic conspiracy? Who put Bella in the Wych Elm? Could alien mind control explain a spate of bizarre killings? Was the gruesome Black Dahlia case the work of a frustrated artist? Can you be hypnotised into committing murder? All this plus a buttock-stabbing phantom stalking London, the doggy detective of Blackburn and more. And FT's own Mistress of Crime Cathi Unsworth is on hand to provide updates, analysis and commentary on the articles. *Weird Crime* is in shops now, or you can order your copy from https://shop.forteantimes.com/products/books.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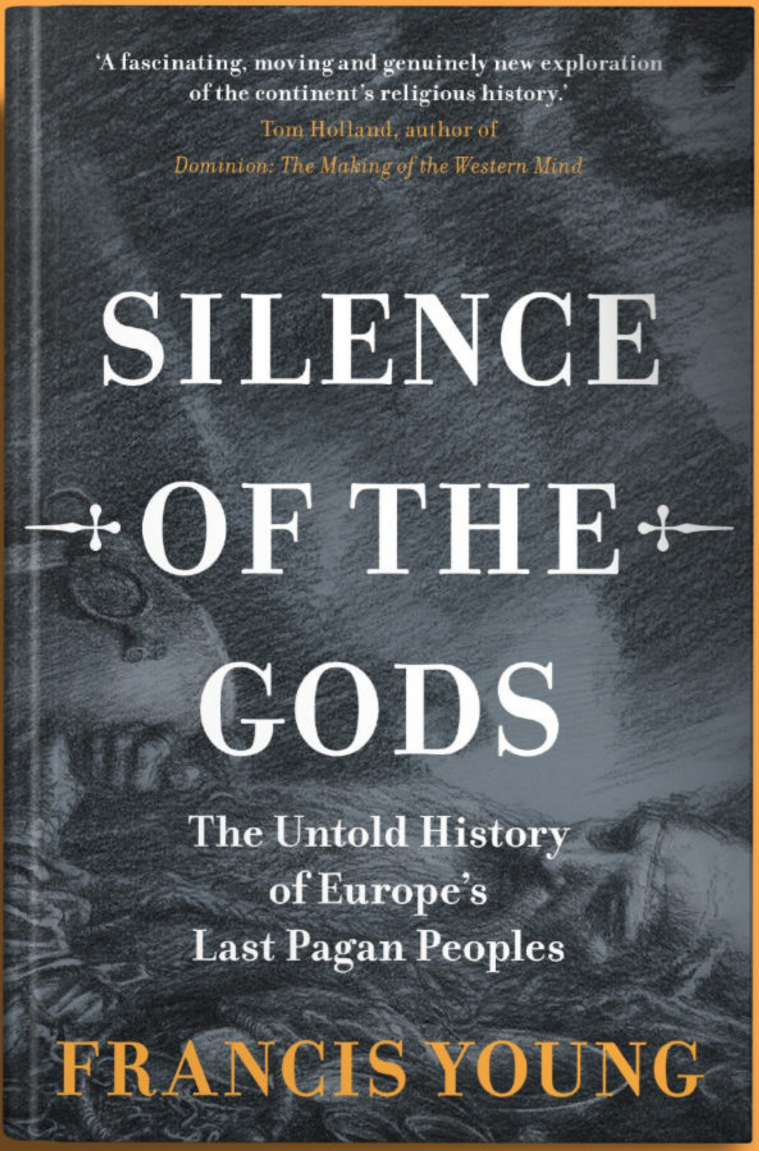
WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM? AND MANY MORE...

ERRATA

FT456:12: The Georgian basalt tablet described in this issue's Archæology column may date from as early as 4,000 BC, not "14,000 years ago". Thanks to Mike Jay for pointing out our error.

FT456:33: Lally Macbeth wrote in to point out a mistake in "the brilliant article 'Death by Faery?' There is a photograph captioned as being Violet Firth aka Dion Fortune. This has done the rounds on the Internet, with it being attributed as a young Dion, but it is in fact a woman named Frances Ludwick Latimer dressed for a performance when she was a student at Pennsylvania College for Women in June 1920. Here's the listing in the Chatham University archive where the photograph is held: https://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt:PCW000232." Which explains why we were so surprised to see a seemingly unknown photograph of Dion Fortune after all these years.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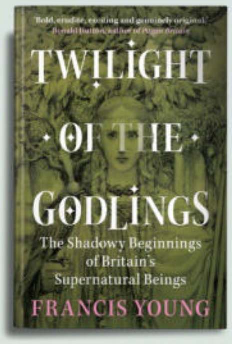
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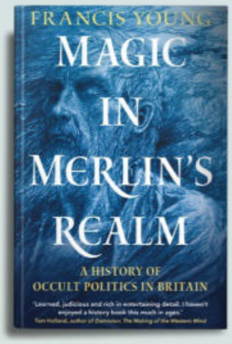
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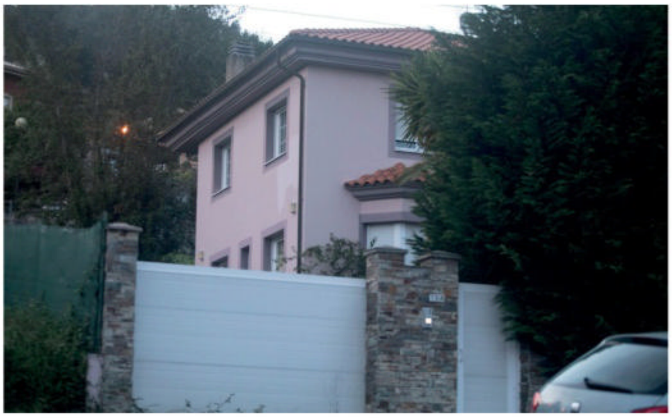
A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

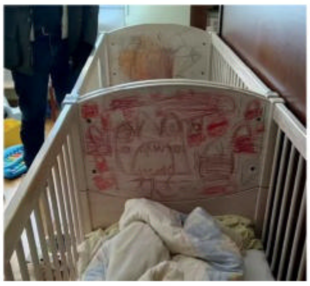
STRANGE DAYS

HOUSE OF HORRORS

Covid-fearing German couple lock children in Spanish home for three and a half years



LEFT: The house in Oviedo where the three children and their parents were found. **BELOW**: Cots with drawings of sharp-toothed monsters.



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Spanish police raided a house in the Toleo district of the city of Oviedo in the north of the country after a neighbour reported her concerns about its inhabitants. Although the blinds were permanently closed and there were no signs of life, the neighbour frequently heard voices that sounded like children, but she had never seen them playing in the garden or going to school. Investigating, police found that only a single man was registered as living at the property, a German named as Christian Steffen, 53, but surveillance revealed regular food deliveries large enough for several people, so they called at the house. Chief Inspector Francisco Lozano, heading the investigation, said, “At first, there was nothing particularly striking,” but once officers asked to come in, Steffen, and his wife Melissa, 48, started to behave strangely, asking officers to wear masks and keep their distance. Both were dishevelled and barefoot. The Steffens were happy to tell the officers that there were children in the house and that they had been isolated since December 2021, during the Covid pandemic; they did not appear to think they were doing anything wrong. Melissa explained to officers that there were three children in the house, all boys – twins aged eight and a 10-year-old – and that they were “very sick”, putting three masks on each child before she would let the officers approach. One of those present said: “They were very scared and around the mother, who told us all the time that the little ones had serious pathologies and that we should not approach them.” Another officer said that the children did not seem sick, but were “in a deplorable state”, explaining that they “weren’t malnourished, because they were fed. But they were also dirty and completely disconnected from reality...”

> *“The boys saw a snail and went crazy – they were scared!”*

Police found that all the doors in the house were locked and that the windows were permanently closed, with the blinds down. The children were forbidden to leave, even to go into the garden, and were forced to wear nappies, but one room had been turned into a makeshift classroom where the couple taught the boys to read, write and draw. The house was in a filthy state, with heaps of rubbish everywhere, dirty nappies piled up in a bathroom and used tampons discarded under the parents’ bed. The family also had a cat, which had a massive tumour, confined in the house, and there was animal excrement everywhere. However, while the parents had installed six air purifiers in their bedroom, the children slept in small, insanitary, cribs on which they had scribbled drawings of sharp-toothed monsters. They were suffering from severe constipation as they had to use the toilet according to a timetable which limited them to a maximum number of visits a day; they had to use nappies the remainder of the time. The house also contained a large supply of ADHD medicine, and the Steffens supplemented this with alternative black market ADHD ‘medications’ containing THC, the psychoactive element in cannabis, although police said that it was unclear whether any of the children had actually been diagnosed with ADHD.

Christian and Melissa told police that they had moved to Spain from Germany after asking German authorities for permission to educate their children at home when the pandemic began and being told that social services would be alerted if they did this. Instead, they fled to Spain and rented the villa in Toleo, where they went into permanent isolation, saying they believed this was the best way to keep the family safe. The only person to leave the house since they moved in in December 2021 had been Christian, and then only to go to the gate of the property to pick up takeaway deliveries and mail, for which he always wore a mask.

Inspector Lozano said that police officers took the boys out into the garden, but the children “didn’t even want to go outside. They saw a snail and went crazy – they were scared.” However, one of the boys knelt on the grass and “touched it with amazement”. Investigators are not clear about the Steffans’ motivation for withdrawing from the world, but suggested that the parents suffered from “Covid syndrome” and had an extreme fear of the virus. They are being held in custody without bail while investigations continue, with Lozano saying, “It is not ruled out that their parents will be charged with crimes of habitual abuse, abandonment of minors, and against fundamental rights,” adding, “We have given three children back their lives, we have dismantled the house of horrors.” The children have been placed under the guardianship of the Ministry of Welfare while investigations proceed. *dailymail.co.uk, 2 May 2025.*

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SIGNALS FROM SPACE

Is alien activity happening within our Solar System?

Most of the effort put into the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) has concentrated on detecting radio signals, but there are other ways of searching for signs of extraterrestrial life. One of these is optical SETI, which looks for ultraviolet, infrared, or visible light signals originating from alien civilisations. Since his retirement, NASA scientist Richard H Stanton has been running his own optical SETI project. He has been using the 76.2cm (30in) telescope at the Shay Meadow Observatory in California and a multi-channel photometer that he designed to systematically scan 1,300 Sun-like stars for potentially intelligent optical signals. "My approach is to stare at a single star for roughly one hour using photon counting to sample the star's light at what is considered a very high time-resolution for astronomy," Stanton says, adding, "The resulting time series are then searched for pulses and optical tones… I'm not sure if anyone else is doing this with a significant time commitment".

On 14 May 2023, he picked up an unexpected "signal" while observing the Sun-like F-type star HD 89389 in the constellation Ursa Major: two fast, identical pulses of light, 4.4 seconds apart. After double-checking previous surveys of the star, he confirmed that no similar pulses of light had previously been detected coming from it. He then checked the pulses against things that could be mistaken for a signal from space and was able to rule out lightning, meteors, aircraft, satellites, system noise, and other atmospheric phenomena. He could find no discoveries of similar pulses, so checked historical data for any "overlooked" detections, and turned up a nearly identical pair of light pulses detected from the star HD 217014 on 30 September 2019. This star is very similar to our Sun, and is orbited by the first exoplanet detected by humans. Subsequently, he found a third signal, from HD 12051, 81 light-years from Earth, detected on 18 January this year. All three signals are very similar, occurring in pairs, with the pulses of light separated by between 1.2 and 4.4 seconds. Further analysis of the 2023 signal made it even harder to explain as a natural phenomenon. During the pulses of light, HD 89389 got brighter, then fainter, and brighter again before returning to its normal light levels, "all in about 0.2 seconds." This variation is far too strong to be caused by a false signal, Stanton says, and itis difficult to imagine how the signal can result from the natural activity of the star: "How do you make a star, over a million kilometres across, partially disappear in a tenth of a second? The source of this variation can't be as far away as the star itself." In fact, he suspects that whatever modulated these stars' light must be relatively close to Earth, implying that any ETI activity could be within our Solar System. Photography data showed that nothing else was moving near the star when the signal was detected, and when analysing the structure of the starlight between pulses he found a repeating pattern at exactly the 4.4-second mark of the second pulse that defies conventional explanations.

A shockwave in Earth's atmosphere could explain the detections, but Stanton says that this is unlikely, "since shockwaves would have had to occur with perfect timing to coincide with all three optical pulses". He has also considered starlight diffraction by a distant object in the Solar System, partial eclipses caused by satellites or asteroids, edge refraction and gravitational waves, but none of these explanations are satisfying. While it is tempting to conclude that these pulses are a technosignature of intelligent ETs, Stanton sounds a note of caution: "We don't know what kind of object could produce these pulses or how far away it is. We don't know if the two-pulse signal is produced by something passing between us and the star or if it is generated by something that modulates the star's light without moving across the field. Until we learn more, we can't even say whether or not extraterrestrials are involved!" He goes on to suggest two further steps to clarify the origin of these pulses. Firstly, "Look for events using arrays of synchronised optical telescopes. If the object is moving between the star and us, this approach should tell us how fast it is moving normal to the line of sight, and potentially its size and distance"; and secondly, "Observing events with telescopes separated by a few hundred kilometres might show that any separation in the time each pulse arrives is due only to differences in the light time from the star to each telescope. Then, unless the variation could somehow be attributed to the star itself, we would have even more to explain!" Nonetheless, until a satisfactory natural explanation for these signals is found, they remain among our best intimations so far that there may be intelligent life out there in the universe. *phys.org, 16 May; thedebrief.org, 19 May 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MONSTER LOSES HIS APPEAL ON SENTENCE

(Brisbane) Courier-Mail, 22 May 2023.

Folk who identify as dogs are not allowed to chase people who think they are squirrels

D.Star, 2 Feb 2025.

SHELLSHOCKED VILLAGERS LOSE POSTBOX TO SNAILS

Times, 21 Aug 2024.

Georgia bagpiper dies in Hawaii scuba accident days before missing son's skeletal remains found in backyard treehouse

NY Post, 28 Mar 2025.

SIDELINES

HUMONGOUS FUNGUS

Walking with her father in a field in North Marston, Buckinghamshire, experienced forager Alissimon Minnitt, 27, spotted an immense puffball fungus in the grass. "A giant puffball… it looks like something from another planet," she said. Taking it home, she found it weighed in at record-breaking 5kg (11lb). "It fed my family for a week… I've been eating it ever since. I still have three slices left in my freezer. I'll be honest – I'm a little bit sick of it." She used it in a meatloaf, made mushroom steaks, and even used a slice of it for a pizza base, freezing the rest for later. *BBC News, 14 Dec 2024.*

ASKING FOR IT

On Friday 13 December 2024, a 45-year-old man, named only as John, bought a brand new, state of the art, limited edition Range Rover 2024 SV Edition One, paying £183,000 for the vehicle. It featured massage seats that pulse in time with music, £10,000 graphite wheels and advanced security technology, which, Land Rover Jaguar claim, make the car "unstealable". Less than 60 hours later, it was stolen from John's driveway in Leamington Spa. It has not been seen since. *dailymail.co.uk, 17 Feb 2025.*

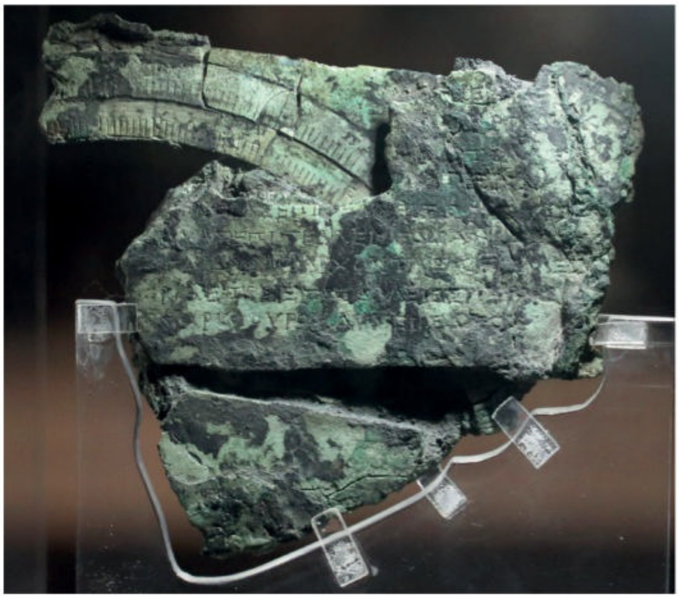
FUNERAL CAR

Although he now owns several expensive cars, when Sanjay Polara's 18-year-old Suzuki Wagon R SUV finally gave up the ghost, he decided to do something special rather than consign it to the scrapheap, as he credits the old Suzuki with bringing prosperity to his family. Polara spent $4,500 on a lavish funeral for the car, attended by 1,500 people at his home in in Padarshinga Village, Gujarat, India. He had a 15-foot grave dug for the vehicle, into which it was lowered, laden with flowers, as music played, after which a shrine honouring the car was erected on the site. *odditycentral.com, 22 Nov 2024.*

ANCIENT MYSTERIES | The Antikythera Mechanism and Indus Valley script

PHOTOS: FRANCESCO BINI / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE AND BELOW: Parts of the Antikythera Mechanism on display in the Athens Museum; 82 parts have been recovered, including bronze gears, although all have suffered from heavy corrosion over the centuries.



DID THE ANTIKYTHERA MECHANISM WORK?

The Antikythera Mechanism is an ancient Greek device made up of intricately meshed bronze gears believed to have been used to track the positions of the Moon and Sun, and to predict the dates of eclipses, the Olympic games, and much else besides. The Mechanism was recovered from a Greek shipwreck in the Aegean in 1901 and dates back to about 60 BC; and, it is claimed, its precision was not seen again until the Renaissance, nearly 1,500 years later. When discovered, the mechanism was broken into 82 heavily corroded bronze lumps, including 30 gears, making up what seems to be about a third of the original machine. Since then, advances in technology have made it possible to peer into these lumps and discern more and more of the mechanism, allowing archæologists to make increasingly accurate reconstructions of the device and to determine its purpose and manner of operation, although, given its fragmentary nature, some of the reconstruction inevitably remains speculative.

> *The mechanism would have been able to predict eclipses*

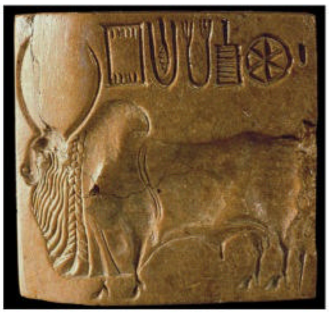
New research using computer simulations, though, has challenged the idea that the Antikythera Mechanism was a precision device. This has centred on the manufacture and accuracy of the triangular teeth on the gears that operate the object, although corrosion, which causes the bronze to turn into a mineral called atacamite, makes it difficult to discern exactly how they functioned as atacamite cracks and shrinks when it dries out. In 2006, Mike Edmunds and colleagues at Cardiff University used CT scans to determine that the mechanism would not have been particularly precise and suggested it had been made for educational use or display rather than prediction. Now, a team from Mar de Plata Nacional University in Argentina, led by Professor Esteban Szigety and Dr Gustavo Arenas, have combined these findings with work on the non-uniform motion caused by triangular teeth done by Alan Thorndike, from the University of Puget Sound, to create a computer simulation of the mechanism's operation. They found that although very little error is introduced by using triangular section teeth, manufacturing inaccuracies would have made the mechanism extremely likely to jam or the gears to disengage during use. They concluded that either the Antikythera Mechanism never functioned, or that Edmunds overestimated the

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Alexander Jones (centre), Mike Edmunds (right) and Yanis Bitsakis (left) sit behind a possible reconstruction of the Antikythera Mechanism during a press conference in Athens in 2016. **BELOW**: A seal showing the Indus Valley script.

errors. "The mechanism would not have even been able to move, because it would have jammed or also the teeth would have disengaged," says Szigety. "One tooth would rotate and the other wouldn't rotate." But he believes this is unlikely, asking, "How could it be that someone invested so much time and so much effort for it to not work in the end?" As a result, he thinks that Edmunds's team exaggerated the errors and that while not being perfectly accurate, the mechanism would have been able to predict eclipses with "very acceptable results".

Edmunds, unsurprisingly, disagrees, and stands by his original conclusions, while Aristeidis Voulgaris at the Thessaloniki Directorate of Culture and Tourism in Greece feels that the distortions introduced by corrosion changed the gears' dimensions and that this must be taken into account, concluding that it was essential that "any attempt to apply precision measurements on the current condition of the gears, axes, includes the effect of the deformation. In this way, we cannot say that 'according to our precise measurements the mechanism never functioned'." The *Daily Grail* suggests other possibilities; that the Antikythera Mechanism was built by someone whose technological vision could not be realised with the manufacturing capabilities of their day, dooming it to failure, much as most of Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions predated the means to make them work by centuries. Either that or it was a bad copy of a much more precise device made by a more skilled hand. Inevitably, research and speculation will continue, and archæologists are once more diving to the wreck, but while they are making stunning discoveries, they have not yet retrieved any more of the mechanism. *newscientist.com, 17 Apr; smithsonianmag.com, 18 Apr; dailymail.co.uk, 23 Apr; dailygrail.com, 6 May 2025.*



ALBUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

INDUS VALLEY BOUNTY

The Indus Valley civilisation was a major culture that thrived along the Indus river in what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan and India between 3300 BC and 1300 BC. Far less is known about the culture, also known as the Harappan, than other contemporary civilisations like Egypt, because despite leaving remains of major cities like Mohenjo-daro, its script has never been deciphered. This is partly because examples are relatively rare; it has not been found inscribed on any buildings, nor have any organic materials such as papyrus with writing in Harrapan script been found. It is restricted to stamp seals, pottery, bronze and copper plates, tools and weapons. Since the script was first revealed in 1875 through the publication of a seal by Sir Alexander Cunningham, numerous attempts have been made to crack the language. Scholars have tried to link it to Dravidian, Sanskrit and other language families, but with limited success, while the length of the inscriptions, no more than 30 symbols, makes them too short for computer analysis.

Now, the splendidly named chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Muthuvel Karunanidhi Stalin, is offering a $1million (£830,000) prize to anyone who can successfully decipher the script. While Tamil Nadu is in the south of India, a long way from the Indus Valley, there is considerable interest in the script from scholars there as ancient graffiti marks in the region, also undeciphered, appear to use symbols closely related to Harrapan. *thehindu.com, 6 Jan; heritagedaily.com, 26 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES

PEGASUS ESCAPES

After experiencing trouble with his plane's battery while trying to take off from Athey's Moor Airfield, near Longframlington, Northumberland, on 3 October 2024, the pilot of a Pegasus Quantum 15 ultralight aircraft got out to start the plane by hand. Unfortunately, he had left the brake off, and, as soon as the engine fired up, the plane, "accelerated away from the pilot and took off" with no one on board. According to the Air Accident Investigation Branch, "It was subsequently tracked by radar as it flew over the coast north of Newcastle and out to sea... It was presumed to have subsequently crashed into the sea." *BBC News, 18 Dec 2024.*

OWN PETARD

Richard Lacey, 70, pleaded guilty to a charge of drink driving at Llandrindod Wells Magistrates' Court in Wales after he was found to have 41 micrograms of alcohol on his breath, exceeding the legal limit of 35. Lacey explained that he could not really argue as before he retired he had been responsible for designing the breathalyser that had caught him. Meanwhile, in California, Ali Mused Adel Mohamed, 27, was caught speeding in his 2022 Rolls-Royce Ghost, also well over the alcohol limit. Officers searching the car found a large amount of cannabis and a baby spider monkey in a pink onesie. *BBC News, 20 Dec 2024; nypost.com, 1 Jan 2025.*

AN ILL WIND

Rhiannon Evans, 25, made legal history when she was the first person in Britain to be convicted of "cyber-farting". Over the Christmas period, Evans sent seven farting videos to her boyfriend's ex-partner, with whom he was having a child contact dispute. In court, prosecutor Diane Williams explained that each video showed "Miss Evans passing wind, her face smiling at the camera" and that she had made the videos by "placing the camera on her bottom and passing the gas". Williams added that "it was purely malicious. She was smirking throughout, she found it hilarious, but the victim didn't." *metro.co.uk, 30 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

BANANA REPUBLIC?

Sweden's gender equality minister, Paulina Brandberg, has admitted to having the "world's weirdest phobia – of bananas". Bananaphobia can result in sufferers experiencing serious symptoms such as anxiety and nausea on seeing or smelling the fruit, so on official visits her staff have to make sure any are removed before Brandberg arrives. She says this is "something I'm getting professional help for," and got support from opposition politician Teresa Carvalho, who confessed to suffering from the phobia too. *BBC News, 14 Nov 2024.*

CALIFORNIA MAN

Staff at San Antonio regional hospital in Upland, California, were mystified when they checked a toilet that a man had been seen entering but not leaving, and found it empty. They soon realised, though, that he'd moved some tiles and disappeared into the ceiling. Police used a pole camera to locate the man in the confined space above the emergency room among a maze of wires, plumbing, and HVAC lines, immovably wedged between an air conditioning unit and a steel beam, in complete darkness. It took firefighters an hour to extract him, causing $5,000 worth of damage. It is believed drugs were involved. *theguardian.com, 22 Nov 2024.*

TREK TRAFFIC TROUBLE

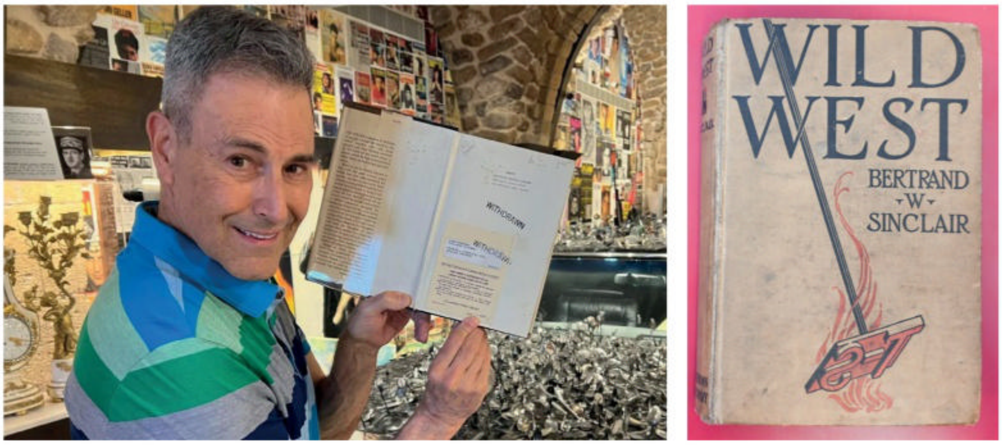
Despite giving up driving in 2020, Beda Koorey, from Huntington, New York, has been deluged with hundreds of traffic tickets from across the US. When she did drive, she had a state-issued licence plate numbered "NCC-1701", which is also the official number of the *USS Enterprise* on *Star Trek*. In states where novelty plates are allowed, many Trekkies have ones sporting this number, and whenever they committed a traffic violation, Koorey got their ticket. It took lengthy legal action to get the Department of Motor Vehicles to annul just the New York tickets, and she has 23 other states to deal with as well. *wtok.com, 14 Dec 2024.*

PENALTY CHARGE NOTICE
WARNING

MARTIN ROSS

LATE AGAIN!

Our latest round-up of long-errant library books, including Uri Geller's contribution to the genre



URI GELLER

CINCINNATI & HAMILTON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

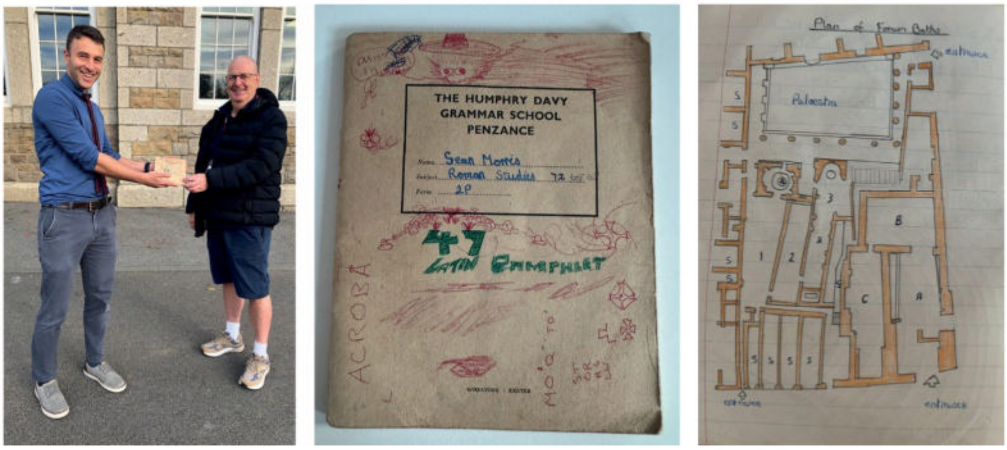
ABOVE: Uri Geller with the copy of *The Geller Papers* he borrowed from a Los Angeles library in January 1977 and forgot to return. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The copy of *Wild West* checked out in October 1926 and returned in November 2024.

Uri Geller seems to be determined to turn up in every fortean category, and having aced psi powers, UFOs, predictions and a whole bunch more, he has now moved on to extremely overdue library books. Rummaging through boxes in his storage unit in Israel he found one that he had failed to return to the Los Angeles Public Library 47 years ago. Inevitably, it was about himself – *The Geller Papers*, a compilation of scientific papers detailing CIA-sponsored research into his claims of psi-powers, which he had borrowed from the library in January 1977. Apparently he had been staying in LA with New Age writer Carlos Castaneda and wanted to show him the book, but as he didn't have his own copy to hand, he borrowed one from the Cahuenga branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. He then "totally forgot about it" and over the years it has been carted about with Geller's possessions from California to New York to Connecticut, back to New York, then to London, Massachusetts, and finally to Israel. An admitted hoarder, Geller turned the book up again when rummaging through his boxes in search of the lids to two Ming vases. "I slash open the tape and I start pulling out the books and lo-and-behold the yellow paper is in front of my eyes," he said. Geller was "elated" when he found the book, saying, "When I saw it, the first thing that came to my mind was: 'Wow, I've gone through so much in my life'." He decided to return the book, so sent it to his daughter Natalie Geller Kaldes, who now lives in Los Angeles, and she took it back to the library, fearing a massive fine. She was pleasantly surprised though; the library no longer levies fines, and as the book had been withdrawn from the catalogue some years after it disappeared, Geller Kaldes was allowed to keep it. Library spokesperson Monica Valencia said, "It truly was a delight to have this particular work brought back by Uri Geller's daughter," while Geller Kaldes said, "It kind of makes it even more special that we get to keep it now." *BBC News, 4 June 2024.*

> *"It kind of makes it more special that we get to keep it now"*

- Staff at the library in Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, received a parcel In February that they describe as "a complete mystery". It had been posted in Budapest, Hungary, and contained a book with an old Warwickshire Libraries stamp, *Colourpoint Longhair and Himalayan Cats*, published in 1971. Librarian Aimee Hawkins said, "We aren't sure who sent the book back or how long ago it was taken out," as it had gone missing before the library systems were digitised. "It is very unusual for us to have a book returned to us this late, and especially from somewhere so far away," she said, adding, "This charming old book caught our attention not only for its international journey but also due to the photos of extremely grumpy looking cats inside." *Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald, 6 Feb 2025.*

- In October 1926, the hot new book was *Wild West* by Bertrand W Sinclair, and that month someone borrowed a copy from the Price Hill branch of the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library in Ohio. It was due back on 23 November, but never made it. Instead, it was dropped off at the library in November 2024. Librarian Christopher Smith said: "It sat on my desk for a month or more before I really got to it, then I looked into it and thought 'Oh my God! This had been checked out 98 years ago." Smith doesn't know much about who returned the book, only that they found it among



HUMHRY DAVY SCHOOL / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: Sean Morris is reunited with his 1975 exercise book at the Humphry Davy School in Penzance; the book, labelled "Roman Studies", was filled with Sean's detailed plans of Roman baths and cities.

a deceased family member's possessions. "They took the extra steps and brought it to the library," Smith said. "There's almost like divine guidance with this book… it was returned in November of 2024. That was 98 years to the month when it was due." Although, in common with most libraries, Price Hill no longer charges late fines, at the two cents a day rate current in 1926, it would have racked up a $750 penalty for the mystery borrower. As the book was in excellent condition, Smith had *Wild West* returned to the library's catalogue, and it has already been taken out by another reader, who Smith hopes will return it more promptly than its previous borrower. *USA Today, 27 Mar 2025.*

- St Bees school in Cumbria had a book returned to its library 113 years after a pupil had borrowed it. *The Poetry of Lord Byron* had been discovered by a man in Carmarthenshire, South Wales, who saw the school stamp and felt it should be returned. Inside the blue clothbound book was the name Leonard Ewbank and the date 25 September 1911. Research by the school found that Ewbank was a pupil there between 1902 and 1911 and had gone on to study at Queen's College, Oxford. In 1915, during World War I, he joined the 15th Border Regiment and was killed in battle on 23 February 1916. The school honour roll commemorates him as "an Englishman, brave, honest and loyal". Head Teacher Andrew Keep said St Bees was "honoured" to have the book returned, saying, "It's incredible to think that a piece of St Bees' history has found its way back to us after all these years." *theguardian.co.uk, 19 Oct 2024.*

- *The Early Work of Aubrey Beardsley*, published in July 1899, eventually found its way home late in 2024, having been on the shelves of the Worcester Public Library in Massachusetts from when it was first published until 1973, when it was borrowed but not returned. Last November, though, it was found by a Boston resident who wanted to keep it from being thrown away and so brought it to the Cambridge Public Library. There, staff realised it wasn't one of their books, and also noticed its original due date 22 May 1973. Cambridge Public Library's manager of collections, Kathy Penny, sent the book to the Worcester Public Library with a handwritten note that read: "Returning to its rightful home, 51 years later." Worcester librarian Alex London received the book, saying, "It's a rarity that someone found this, but not only that they found it, but that it is in such good condition." Library director Jason Homer said that he had never received such an overdue book, saying: "With something that is this old, over 100 years old, how many people touched it? How many people worked with it, how many people read it? That's something that's really fun to think about, the preservation of materials that we're able to have." *edition.cnn.com, 12 Nov 2024.*

- It was an exercise book that got returned at the Humphry Davy School in Penzance, Cornwall. History teacher Alex Morgan was tidying a classroom at the school when he discovered the book in the bottom of a drawer. Labelled "Roman Studies" it had the name Sean Morris on it, and was dated 1975, when Morris would have been about 12; it was filled with detailed sketches of an amphitheatre, Roman bathing systems and cities, all labelled in Morris's neat handwriting. Head teacher Kirstie Oliver said: "We were all completely blown away by this book that had been hiding in the bottom of a drawer and hadn't been found in 49 years." Shown the book, one of the school's current pupils said: "It's like a glimpse into the past. It reminds us that our time here matters and that maybe one day, someone will find our things and remember us too."

"I could tell this wasn't just any exercise book," Morgan said. "It was filled with such dedication and detail that I felt it deserved to be returned." The school shared the find on social media which resulted in Sean Morris getting in touch and being invited back to be reunited with his work. When he was given the book, Morris said he had "absolutely no recollection" of ever having made the drawings, adding, "I recognise the handwriting, but I kind of wish I could still draw like that." Asked what he planned to do with it, Morris said: "I was thinking of putting it in a drawer somewhere!" *BBC News, 24 Nov 2024.*

SIDELINES...

CRAPPING ON ADOLF

Among the items that Simon Kirby, a former director of sanitary products manufacturer Thomas Crapper and Co, put up for auction from his private collection was a chamber pot with the face of Adolf Hitler on the bottom, manufactured by the company during WWII. He was hoping to sell the collection of toilets, basins and baths for £300,000 as a job lot that would continue to be kept as a collection. *<i> 23 Aug 2024.*

WEREWOLF KIDS

Argentine President Javier Milei has been taking what he calls a "chainsaw" to bureaucracy, with the result that he is likely to annul a law that makes the president the godparent of any family's seventh child. Argentine rural superstition believes that such a child will turn into a werewolf, or *lobizón*, during a full Moon. Making the president their symbolic father means they are no longer a seventh child and so escape this fate. A 1974 law authorised a presidential representative to attend the baptism of a seventh child to give them a gold medal and a small scholarship, with more than 12,000 children benefitting since then. *en.hespress.com, 11 Nov 2024.*

FISH REVENGE

Lifeboat technician Paul Hutchinson was left shaken after his small inflatable boat attracted the unwanted attentions of a large skate while he was out fishing off Muckle Roe, Shetland. The creature, believed to be a flapper skate, an endangered species, repeatedly attacked his boat, ramming it, then biting it, leaving teeth embedded in the hull. Hutchinson managed to fend off the angry fish, and made it safely to shore despite the damage to his boat. *BBC News, 24 Nov 2024.*

TOE-TALLY WRONG

In Yarra Ranges, Queensland, Australia, an animal shelter received a dog that had eaten parts of his deceased owner, who had lain undiscovered for some days. Shortly after arrival the animal vomited up a human toe and other body parts, but rather than turning them over to the authorities, shelter worker Joanna Kinman preserved the remains in a jar and attempted to sell them. This, however, swiftly attracted the attention of the police, who arrested Kinman for "offensive conduct involving human remains", which carries a potential two-year prison sentence. *The Courier-Mail (Queensland), 7 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

A NAKED MAN…

A 93-year-old woman living in Los Angeles' El Sereno neighbourhood assumed that the noises coming from under her house were being made by animals in the crawl-space, but when her family began to suspect they were being made deliberately, her son in law Ricardo Silva called the police. Officers found Issac Betancourt, 27, lurking naked in the 2ft (600cm) high space under the house, where they believed he had been living for six months. After unsuccessfully trying to talk him out, they tried to scare him with police dogs, finally resorting to tear gas to shift him. Silva has now blocked entry to the gap with wire to prevent any repeat incidents. *nbclosangeles.com, 9 Nov 2024.*

MORTAL ERROR

It has become a tradition among professional e-sports players to throw their chairs to celebrate a tournament win. However, Mortal Kombat champion RezDyloch came to regret this. Having won £460 in the CEO 2024 Fighting Game Championship in Florida, he flung his chair out of the wrestling ring in which he was competing, smashing a light fitting, for which the venue billed him £2,400. *Metro, 2 Jul 2024.*

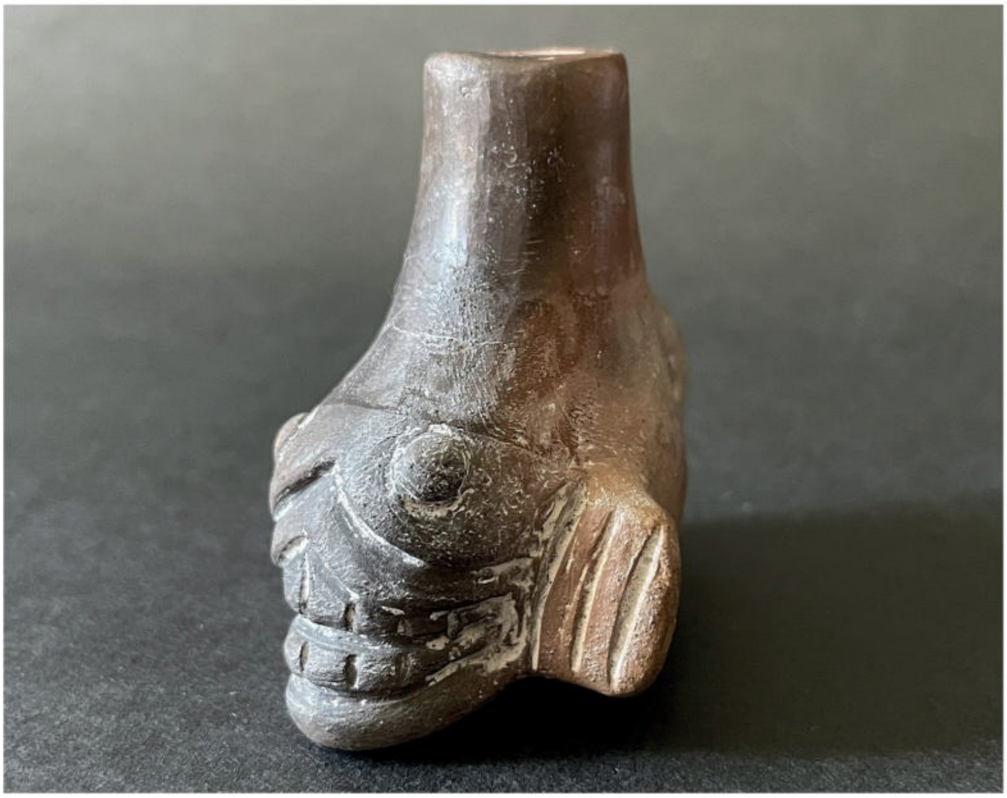
GNOME SURPRISE

When police in Dongemond in the Netherlands found a garden gnome sitting among a pile of narcotics during a major drugs bust, their suspicions were aroused, saying it was "a strange place to keep your garden gnome". Lab testing found that the gnome, which weighed nearly 2kg (4lb), was entirely cast out of the drug MDMA, also known as Ecstasy. "Drugs appear in many shapes and sizes, but every now and then we come across special things," said a police spokesperson. *BBC News, 22 Nov 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

AZTEC DEATH WHISTLE

Researchers unleash the sound of terror



PHOTOS: SASCHA FRÜHHOLZ

ABOVE: The skull-shaped whistles have been found in many Aztec tombs and produce a scream-like sound when blown. **BELOW**: Professor Sascha Frühholz has been testing the 'death whistles' on human subjects.

Aztec tombs dating from AD 1250 to 1521 frequently contain skull-shaped whistles, particularly those of ritual sacrifice victims. When blown, these "death whistles" produce a penetrating scream-like sound, described as "rough and high-pitched". The whistles are thought to have played a role in sacrificial rites and were possibly also used in battle to intimidate enemies. It is suggested that they could represent Ehecatl, the Aztec God of Wind, or emulate the winds of Mictlan, the Aztec underworld, to which the souls of the sacrifices were believed to descend.

Now, researchers from the University of Zurich have tested the effect of the whistles on modern volunteers, using a variety of neuroimaging techniques to identify the brain activity triggered by hearing their sound. Lead author of the study Professor Sascha Frühholz said: "Since the Aztec skull whistle sounds close to a human scream, we wanted to investigate if humans have the same negative and aversive response to Aztec death whistle sounds." Analysing the acoustic profile of various whistles, Professor Frühholz's team found that the sound contains effects usually found in primate screams and "terrifying music", and those subjected to it found the experience extremely negative and frightening. Brain scans showed that the sound puts listeners on high alert, activating the neural regions associated with rage, fear, and grief. It produced strong negative emotional responses as well as a sense of urgency and arousal, setting off a burst of activity in the brain's auditory processing regions as it tried to determine the origins of the sound. This briefly stunned and confused the listeners, and Professor Frühholz says: "Skull whistles might have been used to scare the human sacrifice or the ceremonial audience, but further cross-documentation is needed here." *jpost.com, 17 Nov; dailymail.co.uk, 19 Nov 2024.*

> *"The whistles might have been used to scare the human sacrifice"*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

311: HABEMUS PAPAM AMERICANUM

Recent events in the Vatican predictably boosted box-office takings for the film *Conclave* and the original novel by Robert Harris (2016).

Just as well the Conclave was not like the one that elected Gregory X. It took three years (1268-71) to get that done. It was this drawn-out affair that produced the term 'Conclave', meaning 'Under Lock and Key': the infuriated citizens of Viterbo (north of Rome, site of the proceedings or lack thereof) locked the electors in.

We didn't have to wait long for the puff of white smoke (the seagull family perched by the chimney were the first to know), but it was not the record for brevity; several early popes were elected on the same day on which their predecessor died.

We must also hope the just-concluded Conclave was not so "disgusting and smelly" as earlier ones, caused by old and ill electors crammed together in a badly-ventilated room, according to the various publications of Catholic historian Miles Pattenden.

There are probably various reasons why Robert Francis Prevost chose to be a new Leo. One may well have been the enduring fame of Leo I, known as 'The Great' (on whom, see below).

By the way, 'Leo' is the Swahili word for 'today'. I offer this sop to Africans disappointed yet again by not seeing the first pope elected from their continent.

He might face awkward questions (not least from the Anti-Pope Donaldus Johannes Trump about predecessor Leo XIII (1878-1903) whose Apostolic Letter (*Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* – 'Witness to Our Good Will,' 1899) deplored 'Americanism' among the Catholics of that country as promoting liberalism and pluralism to the detriment of traditional Church values, coming close at times to denouncing it as an actual heresy.

Realisation of this might have tempered Trump's' initial hailing of Prevost's election as 'A Great Honour'.

Two hopes for the new boy. First, that he does not go the way of Leo V, deposed, captured, and murdered by Christopher, cardinal-priest of San Lorenzo in 903, Christopher himself being executed by Sergius III the next year. Secondly, that he does not beat the record of Leo XI who died of cold and fatigue incurred during a religious procession, dying 21 days after taking office, earning the nickname of *Papa Lampo* ('Lightning Pope').

IMAGO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Leo I 'The Great', 440-61, will not (one hopes) be the new man's model in all things. He was famously intolerant of 'Heretics', perhaps sanctioning their torture, certainly advocating the death-penalty for those convicted on the grounds that allowing such people to live would cause the downfall of both human and divine law.

Leo I's great moment (if it happened) took place in AD 452 in northern Italy where he met and deterred Attila the Hun from invading that country.

Attila was suitably known as 'The Scourge of God', brilliantly portrayed by Jack Palance in the film *Sign of the Pagan* (1954). Leo was played by Moroni (Don't drop the 'i') Olsen. The encounter also features on YouTube. This momentous event is depicted in a Vatican fresco painted (1503-4) by Raphael. Initially, Leo's face was that of Pope Julius II, but after the latter died there was a quick metamorphosis to the newly-minted Leo X.

One here thinks of Diego Rivera slipping the face of Lenin on to the mural commissioned for the Rockefeller Center, resulting in its angry American destruction.

Our ancient source for the great confrontation is the *Chronicle* (para 1367) of the contemporary Prosper of Aquitaine, with some later anonymous embellishments. There is a full translation on the Fordham University website. Here, a few extracts and paraphrases must suffice:

"Our most blessed Pope Leo, trusting in the help of God, who never fails the righteous in their trials, undertook the task of negotiating… Attila the Hun, called The Scourge of God, came into Italy inflamed with fury after he had devastated with most savage frenzy (a long list of victims follows)… Leo, the old man of harmless simplicity, venerable in his grey hair and opulent clothes, went to meet the tyrant who was destroying everything and said to the grim tyrant 'We pray for mercy, O Attila, King of Kings…You have conquered everywhere, now we pray that you conquer yourself.' As he spoke, Attila stood up in silence, and, Lo, there appeared the Apostles Peter and Paul with swords drawn over Leo's head, threatening Attila with death if he did not make peace. Whereupon Attila, drained of his fury, at once made peace and withdrew from Italy."

Of cause, there were more mundane reasons for Attila's decision to withdraw. The Huns were being ravaged by disease and famine, and were under threat of attack by the Byzantine army led by Aetius, nicknamed 'Last of the Romans'. The Huns were crushed in two major battles and melted away as a threat to the West.

Attila himself died mysteriously in his bed after a hectic wedding feast, one of countless (some put his nuptials at 400) unions. His new squeeze was a girl called Ildico. Depending on Western (Jordanes) or Eastern (Priscus) sources, The Scourge of God died either of a ruptured blood vessel or Ildico's knife – in *Sign of the Pagan*, she was played by the suggestively-named Rita Gam.

Again, is this Leo story true? It proves nothing, but Edward Gibbon's untypical indulgent account is worth noting (*The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, ch35):

"The pressing eloquence of Leo, his majestic robes, excited the veneration of Attila for the spiritual leader of the Christians. The apparition of the two Apostles, St Peter and St Paul, who menaced the barbarian with instant death if he rejected the prayer of their successor, is one of the noblest legends of ecclesiastical tradition. The safety of Rome might depend on the interposition of celestial beings; and some indulgence is due to a fable which has been represented by the pencil of Raphael and the chisel of Algardi."

"Woke Marxist Pope" – Laura Loomer, far-right conspiracy theorist, 'influencer', one-time campaign adviser to Trumpus.

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING finds a Roman road and basilica under London – plus the world's oldest calendar

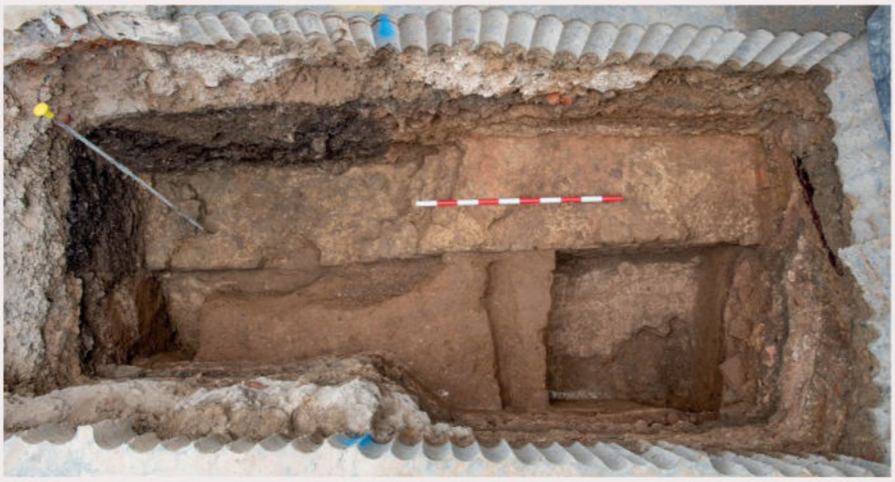
BES DISCOVERY

Branko van Oppen de Ruiter, newly appointed keeper of Greek and Roman exhibits at the Tampa Museum of Art in Florida, noticed a second century BC cup bearing the face of Bes, an Egyptian god fond of revelry, from the El-Fayum Oasis in Egypt, acquired in 1984. There was an identical cup in the Allard Pierson museum of antiquities in Amsterdam, where Dr van Oppen previously worked. There are about 15 identical cups, made from moulds, in museum collections round the world. Bes-shaped vessels played a part in the Bes cult from the 16th century BC to the fifth century AD.

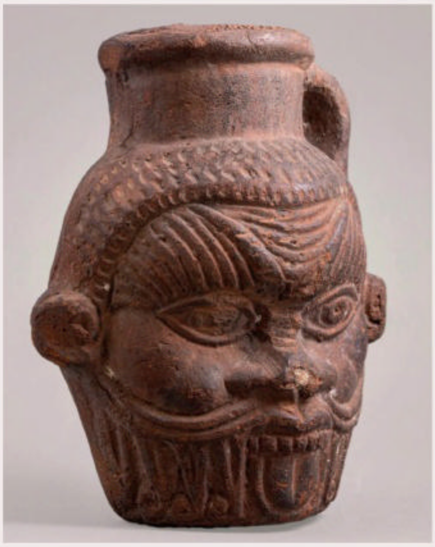
An analysis of the Tampa mug found traces of hallucinogenic plants – the first chemical evidence that the ancient Egyptians ingested hallucinogenic substances, possibly as part of a fertility rite. In ancient Egyptian lore, Bes was responsible for fertility and had a penchant for mischief. "He's a beer drinker and hell-raiser," a demon who just might answer a supplicant's prayers, said Dr van Oppen. "There are so many contradictions embodied in Bes."

Chemical analysis revealed evidence of two plants known to have hallucinogenic properties: Syrian rue and Egyptian blue water lily. The mug also showed traces of sesame seeds, "a fermented alcoholic liquid derived from fruit (probably from grapes)" and flavoured with pine nuts, honey and liquorice. There were also traces of human bodily fluids, including breast milk, blood and mucus (vaginal, nasal or saliva). Their presence showed that this contained a magical potion as opposed to a more narrowly medical one. There were also traces of African spider flower, which some ancient societies believed could help a woman's fertility and labour. But African spider flower and Syrian rue can also cause abortions. It is thought the Bes mug played a role in 'incubation' rituals, in which people – most likely woman hoping to become pregnant – would have gone to a priest and drunk from the mug, which has a volume of 125 millilitres, or about three shots. They could have then experienced vivid visions before falling asleep.

Part dwarf, part cat, Bes was first depicted as a demon, before being transformed into a guardian figure until he became, in the Roman era, a divine being that provided protection from danger and averted harm. He was used for such varied tasks as killing snakes, fighting off evil spirits, watching after children, and aiding women in labour by fighting off evil spirits. Like many Egyptian gods, the worship of Bes or Beset (the female equivalent) was exported overseas. While the female variant was more popular in Minoan Crete, the male version would prove popular with the Phœnicians and the ancient Cypriots. *Scientific Reports, 17 Nov; CNN Science, 26 Nov; NY Times Int. Edition, 30 Nov 2024.*



MUSEUM OF LONDON ARCHAEOLOGY



TAMPA MUSEUM

ABOVE: The remains of London's first Roman basilica, discovered as part of a redevelopment on Gracechurch Street. **LEFT**: A Bes-shaped mug that contained traces of hallucinogenic plants.

LONDON BASILICA

A wall that was part of London's first basilica has been discovered under the basement of 85 Gracechurch Street, an office building owned by Hertshten Properties that's about to be demolished and redeveloped. The site, which will eventually be opened to the public, sheds light on the city's beginnings.

Earlier archæological investigations revealed the ancient basilica's approximate location, so the team created several small test pits to see what was hidden beneath the concrete floor. On the third attempt, digging between the filing cabinets, they struck lucky. "You can see a huge chunk of Roman masonry, and it's incredible that it survives this well," said Sophie Jackson from Museum of London Archæology. The wall is made from a type of limestone from Kent, and formed an imposing building – the basilica would have been about 40m (130ft) long, 20m (65ft) wide and 12m (40ft) high. Other artefacts have been found too, including a roof tile imprinted with the stamp of an official from the ancient city.

The basilica was part of London's forum, a social and commercial hub with a courtyard that was about the size of a football pitch. "The basilica is the town hall, and then in front of it was a big open market square with a range of shops and offices around the outside," explained Ms Jackson. "It's the place you came to do business, to get your court case sorted out, it's where laws were made, and it's where decisions were made about London, but also about the rest of the country." It was built around AD 80, about 40 years after the Romans invaded and founded Londinium. The first basilica and forum were only in use for about 20 years before being replaced by a much larger second forum, perhaps reflecting how quickly the city was growing in size and importance.

This is the latest piece of Roman history to be discovered lying beneath the streets of London's Square Mile. Parts of an amphitheatre are on display under a glass floor at the Guildhall Art Gallery, and at Bloomberg's offices, people can visit the Temple of Mithras, which has been brought to life with an immersive sound and light installation. *BBC News, 12 Feb 2025.*

ROMAN ROAD REVEALED

A section of one of Britain's most important Roman roads has been unearthed under the Old Kent Road in south-east London. Known as Watling Street, the near 2,000-year-old road ran from the Roman port at Dover through London to the West Midlands. Archæological work has been taking place as part of the expansion of Southwark's heating network by the local council and utilities company Veolia. Southwark Council said its discovery provides the first physical proof that sections of the ancient route survive directly beneath its modern counterpart.

Built shortly after the Roman invasion in AD 43, archæologists were able to roughly locate the old Watling Street due to the straight nature of many Roman roads, but there was scant archæological evidence of this. The section of road revealed lies to the south of the junction of Old Kent Road and Ilderton Road and was well preserved, measuring about 19ft (5.8m) wide by almost 5ft (1.4m) high. Southwark Council said distinct layers could be seen and showed a solid foundation of compacted gravel sealed by two layers of chalk, before it was topped with another layer of compacted sand and gravel.

The discovery means modern drivers are following the same route once used by visiting emperors, including Hadrian in AD 122, when he ordered the building of the famous wall, and later in the 14th century as a route of pilgrimage to Canterbury. A sign will now be put up on the nearby railway bridge to mark the findings. *BBC News, 12 Nov 2024.*

CULTIC BUILDING IN ISRAEL

The remains of a 5,000-year-old structure that likely had cultic purposes, one of the oldest public buildings ever found in Israel, has been uncovered near the city of Beit Shemesh. The finds include two pottery kilns, among the oldest ever discovered in Israel, and a public building containing 40 intact vessels that is likely one of the oldest temples ever uncovered in the Judean Lowlands.

"The significance of the site we are working on is immense," said Yitzhak Paz, a researcher with the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), which conducted the excavations. "Among other reasons because it is a very large site that dominates its surroundings, meaning we are dealing with a substantial location that housed a large population that show early signs of urbanization."

The settlement was found at Hurvat Husham, a Bronze Age site, in 2021. The remains of the building include thick walls that housed a space with benches, which the team hypothesises served a public function – perhaps worship. Not far from this building, the archæologists also uncovered an older complex with rows of large standing stones, which was likely also used as a ritual space.

The proximity of these two buildings suggests that locals transitioned from worshipping in a public area to an enclosed space with more regulated access. The Early Bronze Age (the end of the fourth millennium BC) was a complex period for the region that saw an increase in population, the creation of a hierarchical society, the standardisation of various industries, the construction of monumental public buildings and substantial commercial trade with neighbours. *livescience.com, 1 Nov 2024.*

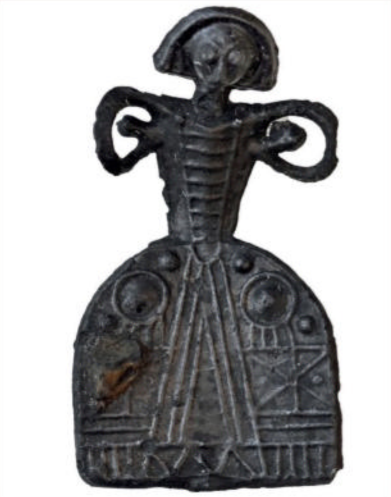
WORLD'S OLDEST CALENDAR

The world's oldest calendar, carved on an ancient pillar around 12,000 years ago, has been discovered at the Gobekli Tepe site in the mountains of Anatolia in Turkey, indicating that people were accurately recording dates 10,000 years before this was documented in Greece in 150 BC. Archæologists found 365 'V' symbols etched on the pillar, each thought to represent a single day. The calendar also shows 12 lunar months with 11 additional days. Additionally, the carvings appear to depict a comet strike that wiped out large animals 13,000 years ago and triggered a mini-ice age that lasted 1,200 years. Dr Martin Sweatman of the University of Edinburgh's School of Engineering, who led the research, said: "It appears the inhabitants of Gobekli Tepe were keen observers of the sky, which is to be expected given their world had been devastated by a comet strike. This event might have triggered civilisation by initiating a new religion and by motivating developments in agriculture to cope with the cold climate. Possibly, their attempts to record what they saw are the first steps towards the development of writing millennia later. The Gobekli Tepe site, which features the oldest known man-made structures (see **FT220:46-51**), was built by hunter-gatherers between 9,600 and 8,200 BC, predating Stonehenge by more than six millennia. *Irish Independent, <i>, Shropshire Star, 8 Aug 2024.*

ANCIENT DOLL

In February 2024, using her metal detector, mudlark Sarah Brackstone, 47, discovered a very rare lead doll, two inches long, dating from the 16th or 17th century, in a bog near her home, Long Whatton, Leicestershire. She had found the torso of a similar doll in the past. Michael Lewis, head of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) run by the British Museum, said that PAS had recorded around 20 parts of similar dolls, but that this is the only complete example. He suggested the loops near the doll's arms could mean it was used as a children's string puppet. The back of the head is decorated with raised pellets and the initials "TT" which experts believe may be a maker's mark. There are several disembodied torsos in the PAS database, and one example that is in three pieces – broken at neck and waist – and missing an arm. It is also heavily corroded, unlike Ms Brackstone's find. *D.Mail, Metro, <i>, 10 June; BBC News, 12 June; The History Blog, 13 June 2024.*

YOLI SCHWARTZ / ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY



PAS

ABOVE LEFT: A bird's-eye view of the excavation near Beit Shemesh. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The lead doll found by Sarah Brackstone in a Leicestershire bog.

Crying wolf?

DAVID HAMBLING says that scientists are sceptical about claims of 'de-extincting' lost species

Making the cover of *Time* magazine is even more significant than making the cover of FT. In April, the magazine featured a white wolf cub engineered by biotech company Colossal Biosciences who claimed that, after 10,000 years, they had used technology to "de-extinct" the species. The media excitement over the adorable cubs was not shared by scientists. Contrary to Hollywood convention, they were not afraid that the ferocious predators would overrun Dallas. They were more concerned about the science involved, or lack of it.

Dire wolves used to roam North and South America, preying on bison, horses, deer, and other large prey. Although no larger than modern grey wolves, they had bigger teeth and a stronger bite and appear to have been more reliant than grey wolves on 'megaherbivore' prey. Grey wolves switched to a mixed diet of hares, rodents, birds and berries, while dire wolves went extinct. Previous generations had heard of them mainly from remains at La Brea Tar Pits; these days dire wolves are best known from *Game of Thrones* – which is why one of the cubs was named Khaleesi.

Colossal claim they recreated dire wolves by "deft genetic engineering and ancient DNA". This idea is familiar from the *Jurassic Park* series, in which dinosaurs are brought back from DNA preserved in amber, so nobody is very surprised that real life should catch up 35 years after the original novel.

All this might ring some alarm bells with science watchers. A new discovery with a huge media fanfare, rather than being announced in a scientific journal, with a photogenic product and pop media tie-ins sounds less like a scientific breakthrough and more like a very effective publicity campaign. No surprise then that independent researchers looking into the details of the project were less than impressed.

Philip Seddon, a zoologist from the University of Otago in New Zealand, says that the cubs are not actual dire wolves, simply "genetically modified grey wolves".

The researchers did not use preserved DNA from dire wolves to create the cubs, because there are no existing samples which are intact enough. Instead they looked at the ancient DNA and identified segments which differed from grey wolves, then used this information to create segments of synthetic DNA. Using CRISPR gene editing – the universal tool for modern genetic engineering – Colossal wrote these segments into grey wolves to create an artificial dire wolf lookalike.

TIME
~~Extinct~~
This is Remus. He's a dire wolf.
The first to exist in over 10,000 years.
Endangered species could
be changed forever
by

It sounds less like a breakthrough and more like a very effective publicity campaign

The term lookalike is apt here because although the Colossal cubs have been modified to have white fur and different-shaped skulls, the researchers only made 20 changes in 14 genes, and the focus seems to have been on ensuring the cubs looked the part. Whether they even succeeded in that is questionable. There is some evidence that dire wolves had red coats. Colossal seem to have chosen white to match the dire wolves in *Game of Thrones*. But they missed a lot of other differences.

"The dire wolf and the grey wolf are genetically distinct by thousands of genes," ran a statement released by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the international organisation globally recognised as the authority on the measures needed to safeguard nature. The IUCN made it clear that the cubs could not be considered to be dire wolves, but they had much more serious concerns about the project.

"Editing the genome of a grey wolf to produce individuals that resemble an extinct species that has no ecological niche and that will not restore ecosystem function, does not follow the guiding principles on creating proxies of extinct species for conservation benefits put in place by the IUCN."

The IUCN is interested in recovering extinct species, and they want to guide research in this direction. Creating white wolf cubs for the media to fawn over does nothing towards filling empty ecological niches and rebuilding damage. And while the IUCN acknowledge the technical breakthroughs made by Colossal, and the tremendous potential of this work, from their point of view, the 'dire wolf' effort is a horribly misdirected piece of showboating.

Even worse, it gives the misleading impression that we can bring back extinct species at will. This is dangerous because it minimises extinction. Mining companies can argue that, sure, tearing up a stretch of rainforest might destroy the last known habitat of a certain lizard so it goes extinct, but the scientists have preserved specimens so they can always recreate it.

Colossal's other projects focus on other charismatic species, with a major effort directed towards recreating woolly mammoths. One suspects that non-woolly mammoths would be too much like elephants to catch the public imagination. They reached a landmark this March with the engineering of 'woolly mice' with shaggy fur, using genes which could be edited into elephants. Again, looking the part is important.

Other targets for de-extinction include the dodo and the thylacine or Tasmanian tiger. This January Colossal claimed to have rebuilt the thylacine genome from a 110-year-old fossilised Tasmanian tiger skull, in theory giving them the complete formula to bring back the Tasmanian tiger.

Arguably the de-extinction angle is simply a way of showcasing the impressive technologies developed by the company. The real money will be in applying this technology in different ways. Less well-known Colossal projects include an mRNA vaccine for elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus, genes for resistance to cane toad toxin, and working with a microbe able to break down plastics.

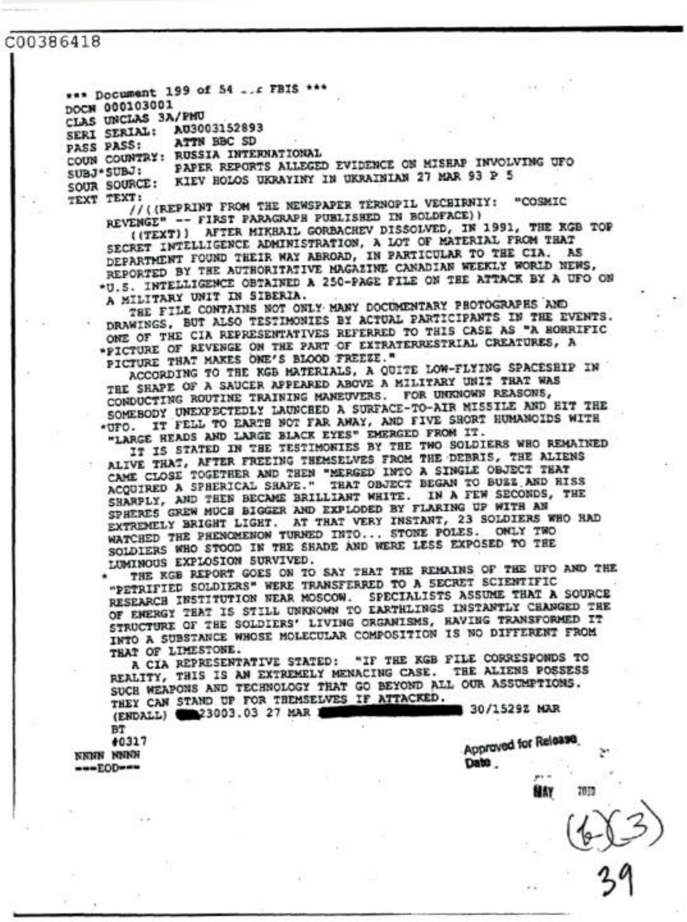
Genetic engineering is a fascinating science with incredible potential. Making it acceptable to the public may involve publicity stunts like producing 'dire wolves' which are pale imitations of the original. The danger is that the public will not only be ignorant of the real capability of the technology, they will be equally ignorant of the risks that go with it. The big bad wolf in this story is not the one on the cover of *Time*.

LOOKING FOR SOME DISCLOSURE

A declassified CIA memo and a weird Soviet UFO encounter

Proponents of the current UFO/UAP Disclosure paradigm seem to be fairly clear what information there is to be disclosed; material about crashed ships and relations with alien races. However, a CIA document recently made public suggests something altogether stranger and more confusing may lie in the vaults. This declassified one page document is a memo summarising what was apparently a 250-page document from the Soviet-era KGB describing an incident in 1989 or 1990.

In this alleged incident, Soviet forces were carrying out a training exercise in Ukraine when they spotted a "low-flying spaceship in the shape of a saucer" and responded by firing a ground-to-air missile at it, bringing the saucer down. According to the report, the craft "fell to Earth not far away, and five short humanoids with large heads and large black eyes emerged from it. After freeing themselves from the debris, the aliens came close together and merged into a single object that acquired a spherical shape and began to buzz and hiss. In a few seconds, the sphere grew much bigger and exploded by flaring up with an extremely bright light. At that very instant, 23 soldiers who had watched the phenomenon turned into stone poles." The report adds that: "'Only two soldiers who stood in the shade and were less exposed to the luminous explosion survived." The petrified soldiers and the UFO were reportedly taken by the KGB to a secret base in Moscow where Soviet scientists examined the "stone poles" and concluded the soldiers had been turned into a substance that was identical to limestone by a source of energy unknown to humans. The CIA memo notes that: "If the KGB file corresponds to reality, this is an extremely menacing case."



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TEXT TEXT:

//((REPRINT FROM THE NEWSPAPER TERNOPIL VECHIRNIY: "COSMIC REVENGE" -- FIRST PARAGRAPH PUBLISHED IN BOLDFACE))

((TEXT)) AFTER MIKHAIL GORBACHEV DISSOLVED, IN 1991, THE KGB TOP SECRET INTELLIGENCE ADMINISTRATION, A LOT OF MATERIAL FROM THAT DEPARTMENT FOUND THEIR WAY ABROAD, IN PARTICULAR TO THE CIA. AS REPORTED BY THE AUTHORITATIVE MAGAZINE CANADIAN WEEKLY WORLD NEWS, *U.S. INTELLIGENCE OBTAINED A 250-PAGE FILE ON THE ATTACK BY A UFO ON A MILITARY UNIT IN SIBERIA.

THE FILE CONTAINS NOT ONLY MANY DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS, BUT ALSO TESTIMONIES BY ACTUAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE EVENTS. ONE OF THE CIA REPRESENTATIVES REFERRED TO THIS CASE AS "A HORRIFIC *PICTURE OF REVENGE ON THE PART OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL CREATURES, A PICTURE THAT MAKES ONE'S BLOOD FREEZE."

ACCORDING TO THE KGB MATERIALS, A QUITE LOW-FLYING SPACESHIP IN THE SHAPE OF A SAUCER APPEARED ABOVE A MILITARY UNIT THAT WAS CONDUCTING ROUTINE TRAINING MANEUVERS. FOR UNKNOWN REASONS, SOMEBODY UNEXPECTEDLY LAUNCHED A SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILE AND HIT THE *UFO. IT FELL TO EARTH NOT FAR AWAY, AND FIVE SHORT HUMANOIDS WITH "LARGE HEADS AND LARGE BLACK EYES" EMERGED FROM IT.

IT IS STATED IN THE TESTIMONIES BY THE TWO SOLDIERS WHO REMAINED ALIVE THAT, AFTER FREEING THEMSELVES FROM THE DEBRIS, THE ALIENS CAME CLOSE TOGETHER AND THEN "MERGED INTO A SINGLE OBJECT THAT ACQUIRED A SPHERICAL SHAPE." THAT OBJECT BEGAN TO BUZZ AND HISS SHARPLY, AND THEN BECAME BRILLIANT WHITE. IN A FEW SECONDS, THE SPHERES GREW MUCH BIGGER AND EXPLODED BY FLARING UP WITH AN EXTREMELY BRIGHT LIGHT. AT THAT VERY INSTANT, 23 SOLDIERS WHO HAD WATCHED THE PHENOMENON TURNED INTO... STONE POLES. ONLY TWO SOLDIERS WHO STOOD IN THE SHADE AND WERE LESS EXPOSED TO THE LUMINOUS EXPLOSION SURVIVED.

* THE KGB REPORT GOES ON TO SAY THAT THE REMAINS OF THE UFO AND THE "PETRIFIED SOLDIERS" WERE TRANSFERRED TO A SECRET SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTION NEAR MOSCOW. SPECIALISTS ASSUME THAT A SOURCE OF ENERGY THAT IS STILL UNKNOWN TO EARTHLINGS INSTANTLY CHANGED THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOLDIERS' LIVING ORGANISMS, HAVING TRANSFORMED IT INTO A SUBSTANCE WHOSE MOLECULAR COMPOSITION IS NO DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF LIMESTONE.

A CIA REPRESENTATIVE STATED: "IF THE KGB FILE CORRESPONDS TO REALITY, THIS IS AN EXTREMELY MENACING CASE. THE ALIENS POSSESS SUCH WEAPONS AND TECHNOLOGY THAT GO BEYOND ALL OUR ASSUMPTIONS. THEY CAN STAND UP FOR THEMSELVES IF ATTACKED.
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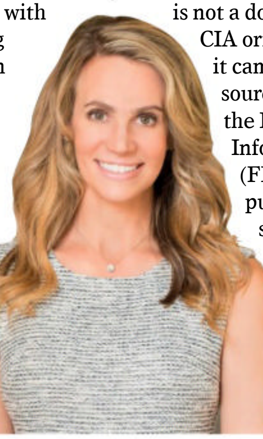
LEFT: The CIA memo describing an encounter between a saucer-shaped UFO and 23 Soviet soldiers who were "turned into stone poles". **BELOW**: Former CIA agent Tracy Walder denies that the document originated with the agency.

The petrified soldiers and the UFO were taken by the KGB to a secret base near Moscow

However, while this tale seems to have an unimpeachable provenance, coming from an official Soviet document that was summarised by the CIA, with the summary later being released to the public on a CIA website, all may not be what it seems. The story was, in fact, first published by the Ukrainian paper *Holos Ukrayiny* ('Voice of Ukraine') on 27 March 1993, then picked up by the *Canadian Weekly World News* in May 2000. *Holos Ukrayiny* is a relatively sober Ukrainian paper, but the *Canadian Weekly World News* seems to be just the Canadian edition of the legendary sensationalist tabloid, famed for fabricating paranormal stories such as "London Bus Found on the Moon". To muddy the waters further, former CIA agent Tracy Walder says of the memo: "This is not a document that the CIA originated," claiming it came from an open-source service called the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), which takes public information, such as newspaper articles, and distributes them to intelligence agencies like the CIA, to whom they may be of interest.



MSTYSLAV CHERNOV / CREATIVE COMMONS

This would mean that there is no evidence that the CIA saw the original Soviet file, but instead just got a report from FBIS on the newspaper stories about it, making it unclear who *did* see the original document – or even if it actually existed. As a result, this could simply be a wild newspaper story with no verifiable source, which has acquired a false veneer of credibility through being summarised in a memo that found its way into the CIA archives, to be released decades later. If Walder is to be believed, it almost certainly means the CIA has no greater insight into the alleged incident beyond what they might have read in the newspapers.

Walder points out that the existence of the memo does not give any indication as to whether the CIA believed the story, but also says that it also provides no evidence that they didn't. Another ex-CIA agent, Mike Baker, is more sceptical. He feels the story reads like a scene from a pulp science fiction novel or 1950s B-movie, saying, "If there was an incident, regardless of the nature of the incident, I suspect that the actual report doesn't look much like what has now come out from five or six or seven iterations of what originally was [written]," adding, "I'm sure there's something out there. I just don't think that they landed decades ago, turned Soviet soldiers into limestone, and we're just now hearing about it. I don't think that's the case." So, as seems to be the case with many seemingly credible sources of UFO reports, once again, "all that is solid melts into air". *cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005517761.pdf; newsnationnow.com, 4 Apr; mirror.co.uk, vice.com, 14 Apr; metro.co.uk, 15 Apr 2025.*

The ghostly monks of Bury St Edmunds

ALAN MURDIE recalls his boyhood entry into the world of ghosts via a series of local hauntings

IAN DAGNALL COMMERCIAL COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Abbeygate Street in the centre of Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk; it is said to be haunted by a ghostly monk. **BELOW**: Elliott O'Donnell's hair-raising collection *The Midnight Hearse* – one of the author's early introductions to the subject of ghosts.

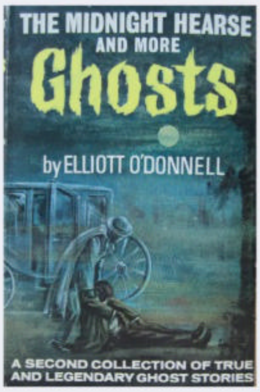
Time rolls on, and it was with some mild sense of shock the other day I realised it is some 50 years since my childhood interest in ghosts was first kindled – the summer of 1975. This was in East Anglia, a great place for spooky stories, in Bury St Edmunds where the ghostly monks from the once great Abbey which grew up around the shrine of St Edmund attracted my boyhood interest.

Like many children before and since I was intrigued by ghost stories. At school my classmates and I keenly shared tales and urban legends, and especially items about the supernatural broadcast on the nightly regional BBC TV news programme *Look East*.

My friend Wiliam's father possessed a considerable library on uncanny topics

I had generally been discouraged by my parents and family from reading about such things, their general view being ghosts were nonsense or out of concern I would suffer nightmares, and we had no books on such subjects at home. Fortunately, I had a good friend named William also interested in the supernatural and whose autodidact Glaswegian father, a post-office engineer and local councillor, possessed a considerable library on uncanny topics and works such as Russell Hope Robbins's *Encyclopaedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*. He let William and me study these at leisure and let me borrow Elliot O'Donnell's hair-raising 1965 book *The Midnight Hearse and More Ghosts*.

I was enthralled by the chilling stories therein, without experiencing any nightmares – though one did alarm me in particular, concerning a white-hooded figure which hovered at a crossroads near Pitlochry in Perthshire. According to O'Donnell this was a most dangerous phantom which would pursue travellers and try and grasp hold of them. If it succeeded, the hapless individual would inevitably die soon afterwards. O'Donnell even claimed to have narrowly escaped this fate himself, describing how when bicycling in the area, he was chased by this spectre and had to pedal madly to escape its grasp.



Regrettably, exposure to this ludicrous tale at a sensitive age of 11 permanently impressed itself upon my malleable young mind and has ensured a faint feeling of unease attaches to Pitlochry for me ever since. Despite coming to love this delightful Scottish town and its environs over many years, I now fear no amount of logical reasoning, rational reflection or even therapy could ever erase this association.

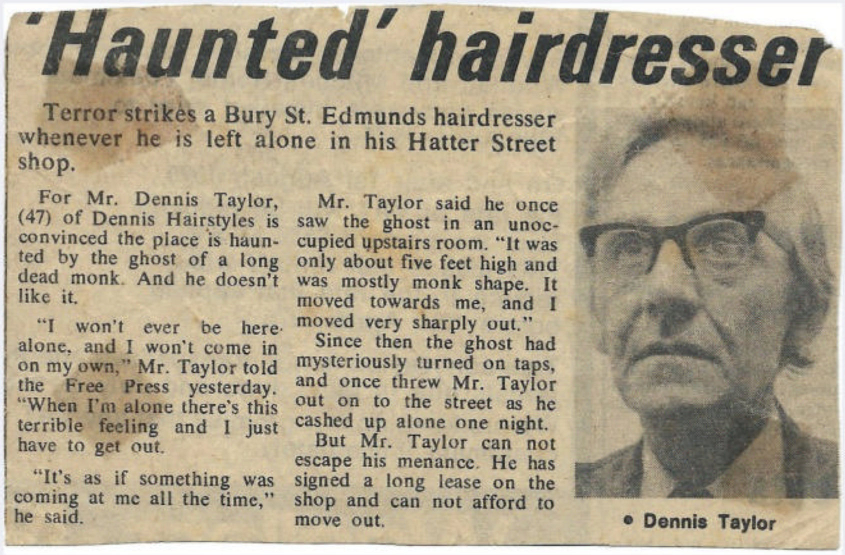
Now at this point, if I had carried on reading stuff like O'Donnell my thinking might well have got out of hand, even rather unhinged and succumbing to all kinds of superstitious notions, imagining a world bristling with spirits, good, bad and indifferent. I did notice that O'Donnell's stories were generally rather old, mostly pre-World War I and nothing more recent than autumn 1952 (the Runcorn poltergeist). Fortunately, what I craved was something more modern and even scientific and luckily I found exactly what I wanted going into the Bury St Edmunds library in July 1975 and picking up a copy of Andrew Green's classic *Our Haunted Kingdom* (1973).

At once I grasped that this book was vastly different, in approach, scope and credibility. Providing a nationwide guide, it contained entries for each British county and only included potentially active sites where ghosts had been reported in the previous 25 years. Typically, these hauntings were a good deal more moderate and subtle than O'Donnell's awful spectres and ultimately more plausible as a result, often manifesting in rather mundane locations, such as factories, offices, council houses and bingo halls. Green was keen on cutting out old wives' tales and promoting scientific investigation. Encouragingly, the book included a strange photograph of an alleged ghost on its cover taken by Green himself in Ealing in 1944 (see **FT342:30-35**), suggesting significant results were achievable.

Eagerly turning to the section devoted to Suffolk, I was immediately struck by the inclusion of Bury St Edmunds, telling me that Abbeygate Street was haunted by the ghost of a monk.

Up until this point, all I knew of spectral monks in Bury St Edmunds was a story of the 'Brown Monk' who was said to haunt the town centre, and a street called the Traverse (this was derived from a newspaper article on Bury ghosts published in the early 1970s, which I have never traced since).

Now here in Green's book were accounts of two sightings, and two named witnesses. Green related how in September 1967 Mr Peter Hearne, a carpenter, saw the apparition of a monk in the cellar of a wine shop in Abbeygate Street. This came six months after Mr Ernest Walton saw a monk in the cellar of his shop in the same street. Abbeygate Street is in the heart of Bury St Edmunds, a minute's walk from where I stood. Deriving its name from one of the two great monastic gateways in the town, it was a street I walked down almost every week. Andrew Green also stated that a phantom monk had been seen close to the main Abbey Gateway in the early 20th century. Suddenly the paranormal seemed very much closer….



'Haunted' hairdresser

Terror strikes a Bury St. Edmunds hairdresser whenever he is left alone in his Hatter Street shop.

For Mr. Dennis Taylor, (47) of Dennis Hairstyles is convinced the place is haunted by the ghost of a long dead monk. And he doesn't like it.

"I won't ever be here alone, and I won't come in on my own," Mr. Taylor told the Free Press yesterday. "When I'm alone there's this terrible feeling and I just have to get out.

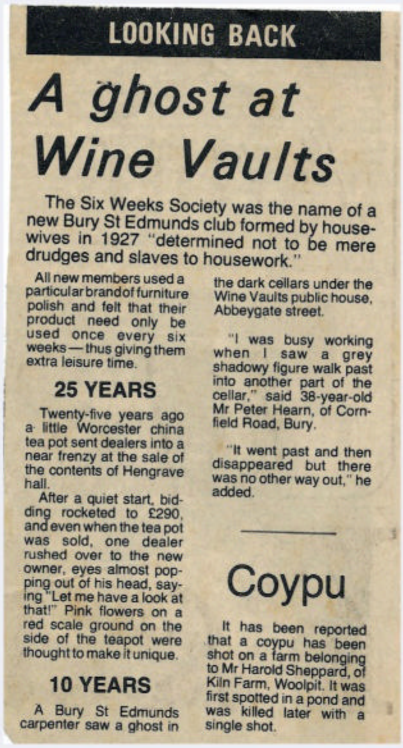
"It's as if something was coming at me all the time," he said.

Mr. Taylor said he once saw the ghost in an unoccupied upstairs room. "It was only about five feet high and was mostly monk shape. It moved towards me, and I moved very sharply out."

Since then the ghost had mysteriously turned on taps, and once threw Mr. Taylor out on to the street as he cashed up alone one night.

But Mr. Taylor can not escape his menance. He has signed a long lease on the shop and can not afford to move out.

• Dennis Taylor



LOOKING BACK

A ghost at Wine Vaults

The Six Weeks Society was the name of a new Bury St Edmunds club formed by housewives in 1927 "determined not to be mere drudges and slaves to housework."

All new members used a particular brand of furniture polish and felt that their product need only be used once every six weeks — thus giving them extra leisure time.

25 YEARS

Twenty-five years ago a little Worcester china tea pot sent dealers into a near frenzy at the sale of the contents of Hengrave hall.

After a quiet start, bidding rocketed to £290, and even when the tea pot was sold, one dealer rushed over to the new owner, eyes almost popping out of his head, saying "Let me have a look at that!" Pink flowers on a red scale ground on the side of the teapot were thought to make it unique.

10 YEARS

A Bury St Edmunds carpenter saw a ghost in the dark cellars under the Wine Vaults public house, Abbeygate street.

"I was busy working when I saw a grey shadowy figure walk past into another part of the cellar," said 38-year-old Mr Peter Hearn, of Cornfield Road, Bury.

"It went past and then disappeared but there was no other way out," he added.

Coypu

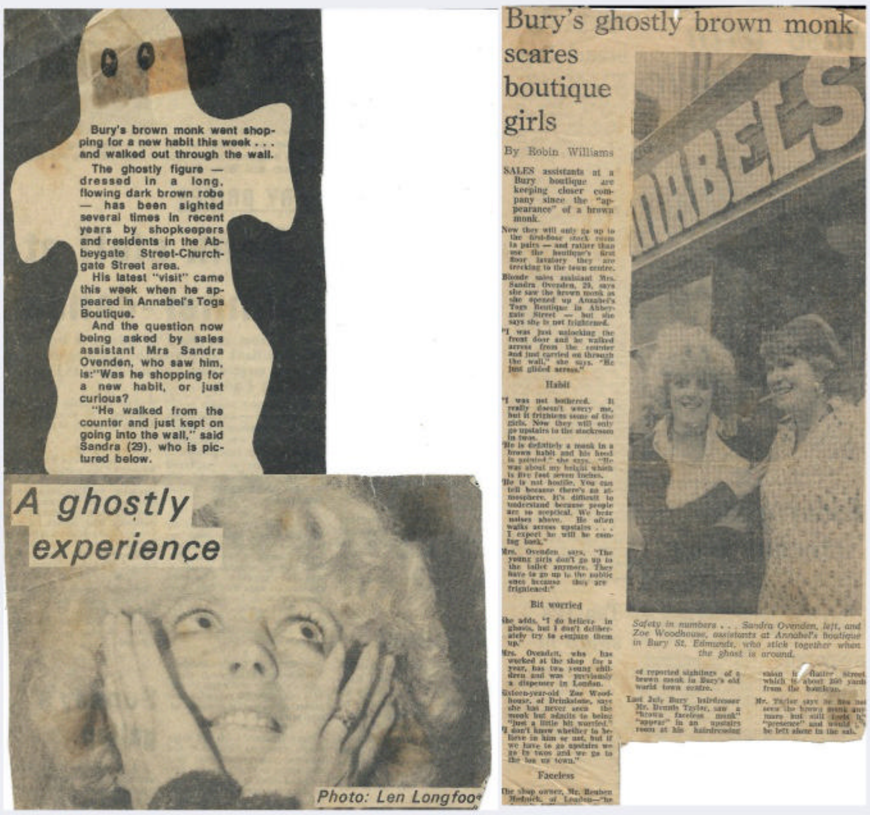
It has been reported that a coypu has been shot on a farm belonging to Mr Harold Sheppard, of Kiln Farm, Woolpit. It was first spotted in a pond and was killed later with a single shot.

ABOVE: Hairdresser Dennis Taylor shares his encounter with the local press in 1975. **LEFT**: A retrospective look at carpenter Peter Hearne's 1967 ghost sighting.

Fascinated, I borrowed *Our Haunted Kingdom* and began studying it at home; little could I have foreseen that I would eventually come to own the manuscript notes from which Andrew Green compiled his work (he presented them to me in 2001). In fact, some of his statements were wrong; Mr Walton, who ran a greengrocery business, actually saw the monk in 1961 during what I later learned was a spate of alleged sightings of the 'Brown Monk'. This nickname was at variance with the historical record; the Bury monks were Benedictines whose robes and habits were black.

It turned out a friend of my father, Mr Ron West, a builder, knew Mr Hearne. Ron remembered hearing of the experience at first-hand from Mr Hearne himself and told me how shortly afterwards a dog was taken into the cellar. The dog reacted adversely, growling at something unseen.

And then just as I was reading Green's book – in one of those nice synchronicities – the front page of the *Bury Free Press* ran a news item about a ghost monk being seen at a hairdressing salon in Hatter Street, just off Abbeygate Street. The witness was the proprietor Mr Dennis Taylor, 47, who felt he was being driven out by a ghostly monk. He complained of a sinister atmosphere and recounted how when he was resting on a sofa in an upstairs room a faceless, hooded figure about five feet (1.5m) high suddenly appeared and moved towards him, causing him to jump up and swiftly flee. He was quoted as saying, "When I'm alone there's this terrible feeling and I just have to get out. It is as if something



Bury's brown monk went shopping for a new habit this week . . . and walked out through the wall.

The ghostly figure — dressed in a long, flowing dark brown robe — has been sighted several times in recent years by shopkeepers and residents in the Abbeygate Street-Churchgate Street area.

His latest "visit" came this week when he appeared in Annabel's Togs Boutique.

And the question now being asked by sales assistant Mrs Sandra Ovenden, who saw him, is:"Was he shopping for a new habit, or just curious?"

"He walked from the counter and just kept on going into the wall," said Sandra (29), who is pictured below.

A ghostly experience

Photo: Len Longfoo

Bury's ghostly brown monk scares boutique girls

By Robin Williams

SALES assistants at a Bury boutique are keeping closer company since the "appearance" of a brown monk.

Now they will only go up to the first-floor stock room in pairs — and rather than use the boutique's first floor lavatory they are trekking to the town centre.

Blonde sales assistant Mrs. Sandra Ovenden, 29, says she saw the brown monk as she opened up Annabel's Togs Boutique in Abbeygate Street — but she says she is not frightened.

"I was just unlocking the front door and he walked across from the counter and just carried on through the wall," she says. "He just glided across."

Habit

"I was not bothered. It really doesn't worry me, but it frightens some of the girls. Now they will only go upstairs to the stockroom in twos.

"He is definitely a monk in a brown habit and his hood is pointed," she says. "He was about my height which is five feet seven inches.

"He is not hostile. You can tell because there's an atmosphere. It's difficult to understand because people are so sceptical. We hear noises above. He often walks across upstairs . . . I expect he will be coming back."

Mrs. Ovenden says, "The young girls don't go up to the toilet anymore. They have to go up to the public ones because they are frightened."

Bit worried

She adds, "I do believe in ghosts, but I don't deliberately try to conjure them up."

Mrs. Ovenden, who has worked at the shop for a year, has two young children and was previously a dispenser in London.

Sixteen-year-old Zoe Woodhouse, of Drinkstone, says she has never seen the monk but admits to being "just a little bit worried."

"I don't know whether to believe in him or not, but if we have to go upstairs we go in twos and we go to the loo up town."

Faceless

The shop owner, Mr. Reuben Mednick, of London—"he

Safety in numbers . . . Sandra Ovenden, left, and Zoe Woodhouse, assistants at Annabel's boutique in Bury St. Edmunds, who stick together when the ghost is around.

of reported sightings of a brown monk in Bury's old world town centre.

Last July Bury hairdresser Mr. Dennis Taylor, saw a "brown faceless monk" "appear" in an upstairs room at his hairdressing

salon in Hatter Street which is about 200 yards from the boutique.

Mr. Taylor says he has not seen the brown monk any more but still feels h "presence" and would be left alone in the sal

LEFT: Clippings from the *Bury Free Press* (some of the first in the author's collection) detailing the further activities of the "Brown Monk", which was haunting Annabel's Togs Boutique in October 1975. Sales assistant Sandra Ovenden looks appropriately terrified. **BELOW**: Peter Underwood knew Bury St Edmunds well, and included various sightings in his 1971 *Gazeteer of British Ghosts*.

Mr Taylor's encounter turned out to be the first of a wave of sightings stretching over the rest of 1975

GAZETTEER OF BRITISH GHOSTS
An illustrated guide to 236 haunted sites
PETER UNDERWOOD

is coming at me all the time." But he had a long lease and could not leave. A photograph of the worried face of Mr Taylor illustrated the piece.

By this time, I had also learned about earlier sightings, from Peter Underwood's *Gazetteer of British Ghosts* which he collected when in the town for military training in 1941-42. I cut out the article from the *Bury Free Press* and opened my own file…

Mr Taylor's encounter turned out to be the first of a wave of reports and sightings stretching over the rest of 1975. At the beginning of October came more stories of the monk, haunting a fashionable lady's clothing shop called Annabel's Togs Boutique, again in Abbeygate Street. Sales assistant Mrs Sandra Ovenden, 29, saw a phantom monk pass through the shop as she opened it up early one morning. She appeared on the front page of the *Bury Free Press* holding her hands up in mock horror. In the photo she appeared clearly less traumatised by seeing this than Mr Taylor, but her colleagues felt scared by unexplained noises and feared being alone on the premises by themselves.

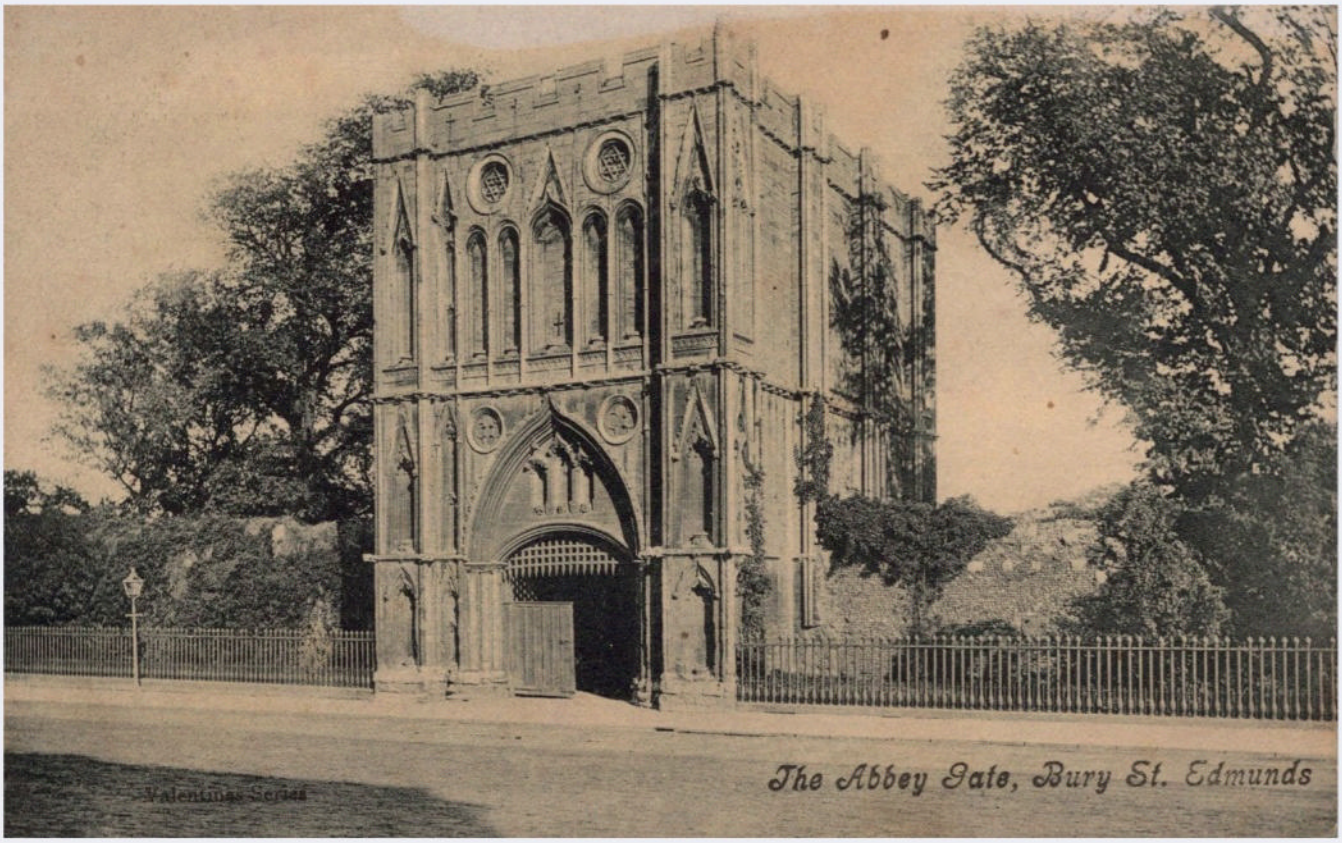
Now if this had been a story to attract customers, it had an unintended consequence as myself and my friend William presumptuously decided we would go and investigate it all. We duly went along and were courteously treated by the doubtless amused staff who patiently endured the questions of two inquisitive schoolboys. We were told the ghost walked through walls in the direction of the Abbey; and how staff thought it possessed an ability to move either upstairs or downstairs at will.

During this same autumn a large 40-foot (12m) shaft was discovered during building works in the cellar of another shop in nearby Churchgate Street, boosting long-standing legends of tunnels and passageways running underneath the town, constructed by monks. My local vicar, the Revd Stanley Gill, told me how one male parishioner gained permission to spend a night in the shaft with a camera hoping to meet the ghost (he didn't) but refused to give me backing for trying to do this myself.

Still, at least this local ghost hunter lived to tell the tale. For Bury possesses – inevitably – its own version of the ubiquitous 'lost fiddler' story. This averred that a secret tunnel running across the Angel Hill in Bury from the Abbey Gateway (or the One Bull public house) to the Angel Hotel was once explored by a man playing a violin, enabling listeners above ground to follow the music and plot his course. As in all other versions, the music ceased and the fiddler never came back, whereupon the tunnel was sealed. In some versions the fiddler's dog accompanies him, and eventually re-emerges shaking like an aspen leaf – but not his master. The Angel Hill tunnel is plausible only because the distance is relatively short, but archæology, geology and engineering opinion in Bury St Edmunds rescues us from fantasy. Certainly, subterranean spaces exist beneath the town, but these are remnants of old chalk workings, not a labyrinth of monastic tunnels and burrows.

Of course, whenever you open a ghost file on an area at any point you may accumulate not just fresh reports but may gather old accounts stretching back in time. My 'Bury monks' file has expanded in both directions.

In 1978 I spoke to an elderly lady from Bury who told me that in the Edwardian era her well-heeled parents struggled to retain servants because their house was



ABOVE: The Abbey Gate, Bury St Edmunds, rumoured to be the entrance to a secret tunnel and the location of another 1975 ghost sighting.

allegedly haunted by apparitions interpreted as monks. The house stood in Hatter Street, and I wondered if it was anywhere near the haunted hairdressers.

However, the sequel to this was anti-climactic and rather sad. I had the opportunity of meeting Mr Taylor in spring 1987. By then his shop was closed and he was cutting hair at another gentleman's hairdressers called Lloyds in the town centre. Lloyds was run by a memorable character named Alfred Nitsche, a jolly Sudetenland Czech-German émigré who had served in the radar section of the Luftwaffe during World War II. Captured by Allied forces, he stayed on in the UK following his release from a POW camp in 1945 and married an English girl. Setting up as a hairdresser, 'Alf', as he was known, did well and bought Lloyds barbers. Stepping into his shop was like undergoing a timeslip experience. It was an intact specimen of a 1930s art-deco barber's parlour, with gleaming chrome and vast recliner chairs originally obtained from a dentist. Alf's jolly demeanour ensured he was a popular and well-respected figure in the town; though perhaps less reverently my youthful peers and I nicknamed him 'Herr Kutt'. However, he was more than capable of dishing mockery back, and he often cheerfully wound us up in turn (brandishing scissors or a razor over someone's head imparts considerable power) and purposefully exaggerating his marked Teutonic accent when he did so, though I was always glad he refrained from asking, "Is it safe?' whenever relaxing in one of his ex-dental chairs (for those with no idea what I am talking about, it's a reference to the 1976 film *Marathon Man* starring Dustin Hoffman and Sir Laurence Olivier).

One day I got to discussing ghosts in the town with Alf. He scoffed at the subject but admitting employing Mr Taylor after his allegedly haunted Hatter Street shop shut down. I asked what he thought of his employee's claims. Alf merely shrugged, but said I could drop in anytime and meet Mr Taylor if I cared to. An opportunity duly arose, but upon meeting Dennis Taylor in person I sensed immediately it was wiser not to raise his experiences of nine years before. Though not yet 60, Mr Taylor came over as a frail, prematurely aged soul, a rather nervous and crestfallen figure. Indeed, he struck me as the epitome of a 'haunted' man, but perhaps not by anything paranormal. I felt it entirely conceivable that Mr Taylor had found business stressful and in turn this triggered an incident of sleep paralysis. A knowledge of basic psychology and a sensitivity towards people are desirable, indeed essential, requisites for any ghost hunter, but they lead to the realisation that sometimes it is kinder not to pursue enquiries.

Other reports of manifestations have reached me across the decades since; including in 2005 a former local police officer who recalled momentarily glimpsing an unexplained figure near the Abbey Gateway one night in November 1975 and in 2010 I heard accounts of a strange atmosphere and object movements in yet another cellar below a coffee shop in Abbeygate Street. Whether caused by ghostly monks or something else is impossible to determine, but it would not surprise me if further experiences attributed to monks arise in years to come; meanwhile, engaging in these recollections, the sports of memory and the passing of people, I reflect how we ourselves may be destined to become tomorrow's ghosts….

Sources, *Bury Free Press*, 1 Aug 1975; *East Anglian Daily Times*, 3 Oct 1975; *Haunted Bury St Edmunds* (2008) Alan Murdie; *Journal of Paraphysics Spontaneous Directory* (1968); personal communication with the late Mrs Copeland of Bury St Edmunds.

THE ONLY WAY IS UP (NORTH)!

ROB GANDY reports from Weird Weekend North 2025

GORDON RUTTER

LEFT: Weirdies on parade (left-right): Gordon Rutter, Richard Freeman, Rob Gandy, Ian Simmons, Hunt Emerson, Neil Nixon, Ruth Morris, Stu Neville, Steve Jones. **BELOW**: 'Barry Tadcaster' and Gef.

On 5-6 April, Weird Weekend North returned for what would have been its 10th event, if that nasty Covid pandemic hadn't got in the way. The Community Hall in Rixton-with-Glazebrook was again the venue. This year there was quite a *Fortean Times* flavour, with News Editor Ian Simmons and several regular contributors presenting, and couch potatoes Stu Neville and Ruth Morris hogging front seats in the audience. As usual, suavely-attired fez-head Barry Tadcaster (aka Richard Freeman), supported by Gef the Talking Mongoose and Batley's own Orang Pendek Ken Jeavons, introduced speakers by describing their darkest indulgences, which they would have preferred to keep secret.

This author opened proceedings with "The Ghosts Of Goblin Hill" (the related article appeared later in **FT457:36-41**). My plan to invite audience members to win a bar of chocolate by guessing the location was ruined by the then current FT's 'Coming Next Month' announcing 'The Haunting Of Shugborough Hall'. I hope that my account of Great Haywood's Tolkien links will have many forteans checking out this attractive village and the Hall. The actual ghost stories were well received, although the 'Emily' ghost photograph inevitably drew challenging comments, as happened at WWN2023 (**FT432:14-15**).

Conference curator Glen Vaudrey focused on Morag the Monster of Loch Morar, which is only half a mile from the sea. Did a Plesiosaur/Sturgeon/Greenland Shark/Long-necked Turtle/Big Eel/Grey Seal make it over this stretch of land to live in the lake and terrify witnesses? Or is it down to mistaken identification of floating trees or lumpy rocks? It is the deepest lake in the UK, and would consume London's Shard – but its water is crystal clear. So why has the monster only been seen 41 times since 1887? Perhaps the best-attested testimony, where a couple of fishermen fought off a beast with their oar and gun, was a tall story to cover their poaching and trying to sink a dead deer….

GORDON RUTTER

After lunch, Ian Simmons outlined the history of fortean publications and organisations, going back to Charlie himself, before describing how Bob Rickard started *The News*, which then morphed into FT as we now know it. There followed a cavalcade of people who were directly and indirectly involved with FT and its UnConventions, including Hunt Emerson, John Michell, Ken Campbell and Ion Will. There had been ups and downs, but FT was still going strong. Ian's favourite FT story? Phantom Sex Dolphins haunting a London theatre!

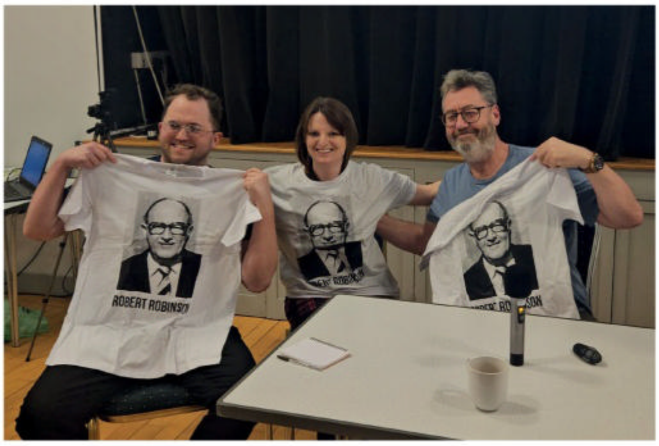
People genuinely thought they were being robbed by a ghost

Tim Prevett, wearing a striking red and black-striped suit, began by wishing everyone a "Happy Star Trek First Contact Day"! He would describe ideas about the relationships between UFOs, angels, demons and communism, which he didn't necessarily believe himself. Christians saw Satan as the "prince of the power of the air", leading some to interpret UFOs as being Nephilim, spirits collecting energy from radioactivity, and suchlike, to break down the barriers between this world and the netherworld, thereby releasing its occupants. Generally, Christianity is suspicious of psychical phenomena and has a different attitude towards Satan and demons than do Islam and Judaism. Tim's apposite quote from *Star Trek* was Captain Kirk's immortal line: "Why does God need a spaceship?"

Cumbria's finest, Neil Nixon, built on his FT article about Elvis (**FT453:28-35**), emphasising that the King's 'power' was quite hard to define. It had to be remembered that when his career began, rock 'n' roll was causing a moral panic in the USA, and audiences originally assumed he was black because of his voice. Elvis read a lot of mystical literature and had an experience where he saw the face of Josef Stalin in the clouds, causing him to exclaim 'It's all true! God is real!' Some people believe he had psychic healing powers. Neil rubbished a few myths about Elvis but pointed out that the 'Wow!' signal from outer space was received less than 24 hours before his death. Were the aliens calling him home?

Amazingly, Weird Weekend North is the only fortean event to feature an annual lard-eating contest. This year's winner, eating the most lard in five minutes, was Ben Fiddler. Well done!

Despite their appearance, I had to explain to the audience that the panel of five for the plenary session were not the scheduled Wollaton Gnomes. The final speaker had made a late withdrawal, and so Gordon Rutter, Richard Freeman, Andy Ross, Ian Simmons and Glen Vaudrey discussed trends in the 'Paranormal Marketplace'. There were increasing numbers of fortean-related events, including (e-)magazines, ghost walks, podcasts, YouTube videos and so on. Was saturation point in sight? A lively debate took place. Findings included: attendances can vary considerably, with no rhyme or reason; the 'seasons' for events are April-May and September-November, events frequently clash, but event co-ordination is unlikely to be feasible; many people (and some organisers) will not travel, with Londoners rarely leaving the capital; the 'market' was currently buoyant, but attendees were an ageing cohort; and Danny Robins draws a huge younger audience with *Uncanny*, but how can other events attract youngsters?



LEFT: Stu Neville's wimning team with their Robert Robinson T-shirts. **BELOW LEFT:** Tim Prevett makes first contact.

STEVE ROBINSHAW

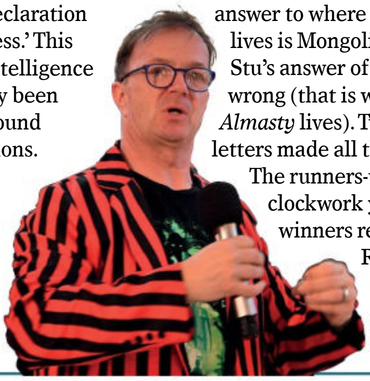
Morag Rose began the initial Sunday presentation by emphasising she was *not* the Morag referred to in Glen Vaudrey's Lake Morar talk the previous day! Her focus was psycho-geography around the waterways of Manchester and Salford, drawing on her experiences with Manchester's Loiterers Resistance Movement. Her eclectic array of phenomena and monsters embraced ghost rivers, dowsing, Jenny Greenteeth, Ralli Quays ghosts, Black Shuck at Blackfriars Bridge, Shadowman, holy springs, graverobbers and Dr John Dee. There was a 'real Ophelia' – a girl drowned under ice in 1813 – and a possible serial killer pushing people into canals. Apparently, Ashton-under-Lyme employed a Boggart Catcher until the 1850s.

WWN regular Steve Jones gave an entertaining tale prompted by curiosity about the origins of the name of Yorkshire's Ringstone Hill, which housed a 17th century pub closed for harbouring highwaymen. One was John Nevison, who had ridden from Kent to York in one day (rather than Dick Turpin) to give him an alibi for a robbery; earning him the nickname 'Swift Nick' from Charles II. Allegedly, Nevison was married by a defrocked priest to a 'moll' from the Thieves Guild on Ringstone Hill with a black cockerel being slaughtered to mark the nuptials. He also made a cunning escape from Leicester Prison; his confederates pretended to be a doctor and undertakers carrying Nevison's 'body' away for burial, with him feigning death by plague using makeup. Consequently, people genuinely thought they were being robbed by a ghost when he returned to his career.

Jack Hunter's presentation set out intriguing questions relating to monsters, 'other minds', communication and models of consciousness, with examples from across the spectral spectrum. Jack pointed out that non-human/animal consciousness was only formally accepted in 2012, with the 'Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness.' This was because intelligence had historically been interpreted around human definitions. Apparently mushrooms have language and many creatures use tools, seemingly through socially learned culture. There were a number of deeply weird cases: Sam the Sandown Clown; a pulsating face in a window; Gef the Talking Mongoose; and an Elf that Jack conversed with via a medium during his research.

Richard Freeman, sans fez, detailed the Centre for Fortean Zoology's third expedition in search of the Caspian Tiger in Tajikistan's Romit Valley in 2023. This included a video of these magnificent animals in a German zoo prior to WWII. Historically, they had ranged from Turkey to China, but had been driven to extinction by loss of habitat, loss of prey and being hunted for fur. The team had gone to the top of the valley, and noted that it was increasingly difficult to find places not adversely affected by humans. All reported experiences were from below the treeline, with none above. The testimonies convinced Richard that the Caspian Tiger exists, and so the team will return again.

Stu Neville's team won the Quiz 7-5, despite his arguing with Richard that one of the questions was unfair. The answer to where the *Almas* lives is Mongolia, and so Stu's answer of Russia was wrong (that is where the *Almasty* lives). Two little letters made all the difference! The runners-up received clockwork yetis, while the winners received Robert Robinson T-shirts. Describing Iceland as one of the planet's youngest islands, Nathan Jackson detailed a whole range of strange and wonderful cryptids, from the King of the Bears (the spawn of a female polar bear and a walrus, which has a single unicorn-like horn) through shapeshifting horses and giant halibut to the better-known elves and trolls. Particularly amusing were the 13 children of Gryla the Christmas Witch, who turn up on consecutive days leading up to 25 December seeking out naughty and disobedient children. Disturbingly, their names reflected their practices, and included Sausage Swiper, Window Peeper and Doorway Sniffer. Iceland's past, present and future are full of forteana.



GORDON RUTTER

The final talk was given by Jackie Tonks, with Richard Freeman, detailing their ongoing research into the Waverley Dragons (**FT451:44-49**). It was prompted by a group witnessing multiple dragons following their table-turning session in the old refectory area of the ruins of Waverley Abbey in Surrey. Might their activities have inadvertently invoked the creatures? The group members were all sincere, giving consistent descriptions of large wingspans, bat-like leathery wings, and long tails with an arrow-shaped end. Jackie ran through the list of plausible mundane explanations she and Richard had explored: priming, misperception, man-made, projected image and mistaken identity. This left something supernatural, thoughtforms or genetic memory; which is really interesting given that dragons are currently being seen all over the world. Watch this space!

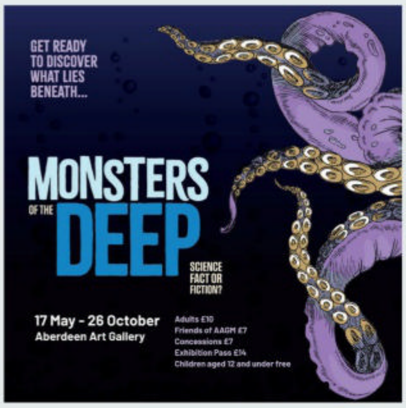
Tickets for WWN2026 (11 & 12 April 2026) are already on sale at www.weirdweekendnorth.com/). There will be a Weird Weekend North Film Festival on 1 November 2025 (www.weirdweekendnorth.com/film-festival).

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER reports on cats, rats, whales and the sea monsters coming to Aberdeen

SEA MONSTERS AHOY!

Beginning on 17 May and running until 26 October 2025, Aberdeen Art Gallery is currently hosting a major cryptozoologically-relevant exhibition entitled 'Monsters of the Deep: Science Fact or Fiction?'. It examines via numerous fascinating displays the age-old question of whether sailors' dramatic tales and traditional folklore of terrifying sea monsters inhabiting the vast oceans worldwide are indeed true or nothing more than the yarns of salty old seadogs. Want to see an exceedingly rare double-tusked narwhal skull, or a bona fide fake Feejee mermaid, or a huge fossil tooth from the monstrous megalodon shark, or a dazzling selection of mediæval maritime charts and spectacular artwork relating to monsters of the deep? Then this exhibition is definitely for you! It has been adapted for Aberdeen by a team of curators and exhibition officers headed by Helen Fothergill – Service Manager at Aberdeen Archives, Gallery and Museums – from an earlier version originating at the National Maritime Museum Cornwall. Moreover, it is supplemented by a wide range of associated activities for visitors to enjoy at the gallery and Aberdeen's Maritime Museum, including tours, talks by scientists and intrepid explorers (such as a lunchtime talk on 4 June entitled 'The Statistics of Sea Monsters' by longstanding cryptozoological researcher and FT contributor Dr Charles Paxton), and classic monster-themed film screenings. I've deliberately not included too much specific detail of what you'll discover at this exhibition so as not to spoil the fun and surprises that await you there. So if you're a cryptozoology fan, be sure to visit it if you can – you'll certainly have a monstrously good time! Entry tickets for adults cost £10, and there are also various concessions – check out these links for further details: *www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/news/monsters-deep-come-ashore-aberdeen-art-gallery; www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/AAGM/whats-aberdeen-art-galleries-and-museums/lunchtime-talk-statistics-sea-monsters*.



JIM SANDERSON / CREATIVE COMMONS

FRANTIŠEK VEJMELKA

LEFT: Monsters of the Deep will be running in Aberdeen until late October. **BELOW CENTRE:** An Andean mountain cat – but not the newly discovered *Leopardus andinus*! **BELOW LEFT:** The subalpine woolly rat caught on camera.

THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE

And with impeccable timing, a very dramatic-looking denizen of the deep has just made a highly unexpected appearance in Scottish waters. The creature in question is a beluga whale, *Delphinapterus leucas*, also known as the white whale on account of its very striking all-white body coloration, and is typically found in the Arctic Ocean, as well as the seas around Greenland, Russia, and North America. Very occasionally, however, a specimen of this migratory species will wend its way south towards British waters, where its eye-catching appearance will always guarantee a delighted if surprised audience, as is the case with this latest example – the first one recorded off Scotland's western coast for 20 years. Sighted and videoed in Loch Broom, a sea loch in this coastal region, during mid-May by Noel Hawkins, a consultant for the Ullapool Sea Savers, in mid-May, it follows in the wake of a Shetland sighting of this same species back in January 2024, which was only the sixth beluga whale sighting made in Scottish waters. *www.thenational.scot/news/25181292.rare-whale-spotted-scottish-west-coast-for-first-time-20-years/*

MOUNTAIN CATS AND MOUNTAIN RATS

Two momentous mammalian finds have hit the headlines lately. First comes news of an allegedly new species of wild cat discovered in South America's Andes mountain highlands. Its existence had been made known to scientists via years of local reports, coupled with camera-trap evidence, and confirmed by genetic comparisons with related species. It has been provisionally dubbed *Leopardus andinus*, allying it with several other small cats endemic to Latin America, such as the tiger cats, ocelot, margay, oncillas, and the long-known Andean mountain cat *L. jacobita*. (Indeed, I am wondering if there may be some confusion at play regarding this supposedly 'new' cat, because the photo heading a recent MSN article about it actually depicts *L. jacobita*. Also, although some media reports claim that it is the first new cat species discovered in the Americas for 80 years, a new oncilla species, *L. guttulus*, was distinguished just a few years ago, and there is much disagreement as to whether certain other *Leopardus* forms also deserve elevating to the taxonomic status of separate species.) As for the rat: this mega-rodent, measuring up to 33in (84cm) long (making it the world's second largest rat species), is the subalpine woolly rat *Mallomys istapantap*, native to the tropical high mountain forests and grasslands of Papua New Guinea, West Papua (Indonesian New Guinea), and Indonesia. It was formally described as a new species in 1989 from museum specimens, but despite its sizeable stature (the largest rodent in the Australian and Oceanian zoogeographic zones) this species had never been filmed or even sighted in the wild by scientists, until now. This was when Czech researcher František Vejmělka filmed it via camera traps and video at the very end of his six-month expedition to the mountains of New Guinea. *www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/a-new-species-of-cat-has-been-found-in-the-andes/ss-AA1EQH90; www.livescience.com/animals/land-mammals/33-inch-long-woolly-mountain-rat-caught-on-camera-for-first-time-ever; www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/mammalia-2024-0153/html*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

The arson attacks on properties linked to the Prime Minister quickly resulted in the arrest of three foreign nationals. Case closed? Not in the Conspirasphere says **NOEL ROONEY**.

FIRESTARTERS

No smoke without fire, they say; in the C-sphere they might add: and no smoke without mirrors. Fire there was, though in two cases it was mostly smoke, when properties – and property – linked to the prime minister became the targets of arson attacks. When the story broke, it looked a big one, terrorism directed at the UK government; thus the immediate, and not unexpected, comments ("an attack on democracy") seemed appropriate.

Given the potential gravity of the situation – the possibility that there was a terrorist cell operating in the UK and targeting high-profile political figures – it made sense that the Counter-Terrorism Unit was put in charge of the investigation. They went to work quickly and got quick results. Three men have been arrested: Roman Lavrynovych, Stanislav Carpiu, and Petro Pochynok. They are due to appear in court on 6 June, accused of arson, intent to endanger life or property, and conspiracy to commit arson.

Two of the men, Lavrynovych and Pochynok, are Ukrainian. The third, Carpiu, is described as a Romanian national born in Ukraine. There are, according to the Met, no more suspects at large. Case closed, you might think. But there are voices in the Conspirasphere that beg to differ.

Conspiracy theories are often built, initially, out of anomalies in the reporting of an incident. There are some aspects of this case that could be seen as anomalies, if one has eyes to see them. First, there were the photos. The BBC, much like other media organs, tends to use police mugshots of suspects in crime cases. You know the type; hollow-eyed figures looking distinctly suspicious (or hungover, regularly) and even guilty. These photos help to underline the story. Think Lucy Letby, or the Bulgarians recently convicted of spying for Russia.

Some have connected the affair to an earlier scandal

This time, however, the Beeb used rather different photos; photos that, as some observers pointed out, suggested not so much guilt as glamour. They resembled social media profile shots, or portfolio pictures; and this set rabbits running down holes. One of the suspects, Carpiu, was described as an aspiring male model; this was quickly translated into male escort. I hardly need to flesh out the picture that follows from these observations, and it should come as no surprise that such a picture was food and drink to conspiracists.

Some observers were concerned that the legacy media, having at first sounded the alarm, went relatively quiet soon afterwards. This might easily be explained by the matter being *sub judice* (although that hasn't always stopped the media from piling in). In the C-sphere, however, silence means connivance. Were the mainstream media hiding the juicy truth from the public?

Then, when stories appeared, quoting anonymous sources in the security apparatus, suggesting that Russia might have had a hand in events, an immediate kind of knee-jerk logic kicked in. They would say that, wouldn't they? It could be argued that UK security forces have form in making Russia the go-to baddie when something untoward happens; that was certainly the line taken in the C-sphere. They also pointed to reports from media outlets in other countries claiming that at least one of the arrested suspects is 'Bandera'. That is to say, a Ukrainian nationalist; and Ukrainian nationalists tend not to collude with Russia.

Some have connected the affair to an earlier scandal, though one has to take the scenic route to do so. Soon after taking office, Mr Starmer was accused of taking gifts of clothes from donors. Lord Alli apparently gave him a suit, which he was forced to return. Others chipped in with the (apparently) relevant fact that Lord Alli had received an accolade from Stonewall. It should be stressed here that Lord Alli is openly gay and advocates for LGBTQ rights, and has done so for many years; no suspicion attaches to him on that ground.

And yet others have, perhaps inevitably, plumped for the crudely obvious and started making jokes about sausages and slips of the tongue. On YouTube, George Galloway refrained from that gambit but was clearly enjoying himself, pontificating on how desperately unimportant Keir Starmer's sexuality was, in a tone of pompous irony that left little doubt in listener's minds what he really thought.

I am routinely puzzled by the public's fascination with, and horror of, what other people do in bed. Politics in particular is treated as if only god-fearing, church-going, missionary position heterosexuals should be let loose on the reins of power. In Ireland we have had an openly gay Taoiseach and Tanaiste, and the sky has stubbornly refused to fall. If that's the conspiracy, it ought to be a damp squib, much like the arson attacks themselves.

And yet, there are aspects of this affair that are genuinely concerning. Three men, clearly with some kind of grudge, were able to find out the addresses of properties connected to the prime minister, and attack them. The attacks appear symbolic, akin to a warning or a blackmail attempt. Were they acting independently, or was someone behind them? And was the point of the exercise to undermine the PM, rather than physically harm him? If so, for what reason and what purpose?

I am confident we will hear more from the Conspirasphere on this matter; momentum is building. Whether a full-blown theory will emerge before the trial date, when the suspects have a chance to give their side of the story, is an open question. More to the point is whether the less august media organs smell blood and decide to go with the unofficial story in a bid to unseat the prime minister. This could yet turn out to be a very messy business indeed.

https://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=309044

https://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=309250

www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx3DO4KYheU&t=469s

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c79evj9ed9lo

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

The oldie baton passes, a serial orphan impersonator is back in prison and a museum makes a grisly find...

HALLMARK CARE HOMES

PARAMOUNT+

ABOVE LEFT: Ethel Caterham, 115, now the world's oldest verified living person. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Samantha Azzopardi seen in the Paramount+ documentary *Con Girl*.

WORLD'S OLDEST PERSON [FT456:8-9]

Having picked up the baton of being the world's oldest verified living person at the end of December, aged 116, Inah Canabarro, a Brazilian nun, relinquished it again on 30 April, dying just a month short of her 117th birthday. She passed away in Porto Alegre at a care home belonging to the Teresian Sisters, the religious community she belonged to. Her nephew said that the 116-year-old had not died of any illness, but that her body "had gradually stopped working". Canabarro, who had been blessed by Pope Francis in 2018, attributed her longevity to her Christian faith, saying that: "He [God] is the secret to life."

This means that the title passed to Ethel Caterham, from Lightwater, Surrey, who was 115 years and 252 days old when she inherited it. Born in Shipton Bellinger, Hampshire, on 21 August 1909, the second youngest of eight children, Caterham is the first Briton to hold the record since Anne Williams, who was the world's oldest person from 2 February 1987 to 27 December 1987, dying at the age of 114 years, 208 days.

This also makes Caterham the longest-lived British person ever, although Thomas "Old Tom" Parr (**FT48:68, 66:33**), who died in 1635, is said to have lived to the age of 152 years and 19 days, spending most of his life in Shropshire. He claimed to have been born in October 1483 and to have lived through the reigns of 10 monarchs, but this was long before verifiable birth records existed.

Caterham, who has been the oldest living person in Britain for some time, is also the oldest person known to have survived Covid, having contracted it in 2020 at the age of 110, but made a full recovery. She has lived in Surrey most of her life, only gave up driving aged 97, and attributes her longevity to "never arguing with anyone; I listen, and I do what I like".

Commenting on the interest in her age on the occasion of her 115th birthday, Caterham said she "didn't know why there was all the fuss." *BBC News, 1 May 2025.*

SAMANTHA AZZOPARDI [FT408:21, 428:26]

After blazing a trail of fraud, confusion and outrage across Australia, Canada and Ireland, racking up an impressive criminal record in the process, it might have been reasonable to think that when Samantha Azzopardi landed in court for the 100th time in 2022, at the age of 33, she might have reached the end of her career as a highly imaginative fantasist and orphan impersonator. Then, she received a 17-month sentence, reduced on appeal, for pretending to be a 14-year-old fleeing abuse in France and fraudulently obtaining support from an Australian Jewish care charity. However, in October 2024 she was back in court, this time for swindling $AUS25,000 (£12,000) from two Melbourne crisis accommodation services, a scam she pulled just 40 days after leaving jail for her previous conviction. This time Azzopardi, now 36, claimed she was a 17-year-old Belgian named Hattie Leigh who was the victim of physical and sexual abuse by her stepfather. She faked a positive pregnancy test, used AI to fabricate a photo of herself and a sibling as children, and even had freckles tattooed on her face to help her appear younger. As a result, the crisis services believed her sob story and provided her with accommodation, plus gift cards and vouchers for food, clothing and public transport worth $AUS25,000.

Given two years in jail for the crime, Azzopardi appealed against the sentence in February, with her lawyer pushing for a community order on the basis that her PTSD, intellectual disabilities and personality disorder justified a reduced sentence, claiming that there was no evidence his client was "any cunning mastermind". Unimpressed, Judge Fran Dalziel responded that Azzopardi was "extremely cunning", adding that she considered everything Azzopardi said as "potentially false" and that rather than reducing her jail time, she was considering increasing it; at which point Azzopardi dropped her appeal. After first coming to the attention of authorities in Rockhampton, Australia, in November 2007, when she was

19, for trying to enrol in schools as a much younger teen named Dakota Johnson, Azzopardi went on to pretend to be teen girls named Emily Peet, Lindsay Coughlin, Georgia McAuliffe, Harper Hernandez, Harper Hart and many others. She claimed to have been, at various times, a kidnapped Swedish royal, a nanny (she abducted her charges and used them as props for another scam), a Russian gymnast who was the sole survivor of a murder-suicide incident, and a whole variety of other victims, waifs and strays in order to obtain accommodation, sympathy and funds from social services and charities. It is unlikely that this will be the last we hear of her. *Herald Sun (Australia), 12 Feb 2025.*

ROAD GHOUL [FT457:6]

Police in Bennington, Nebraska, investigating a series of unusual road accidents in which drivers hit objects such as a coffee table, a chair, and a child's bicycle left in the middle of Highway 36 at night, after which the same mysterious man appeared to offer help to victims, have arrested 23-year-old Spencer Rademacker. Dubbed the 'highway phantom', Rademacker is suspected of causing crashes for motives similar to those of arsonists. Sheriff Aaron Hanson explained: "We assume that he likes to watch the accidents… be the first one on the scene to render aid and to see the first responders respond," adding that Rademacker's actions "almost got someone killed and could have gotten multiple people killed." *boingboing.net, 20 Mar 2025.*

ANTHROPODERMIC BIBLIOPEGY [FT448:15]

It has long been known that Moyses Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, holds a book recounting Maria Martens's famed "Murder in the Red Barn" bound in the skin of her murderer William Corder by the surgeon George Creed, who dissected Corder's corpse after he was hanged. Recently, though, curators going through the museum catalogue realised there was a second book bound in Corder's skin somewhere in the collection, donated by Creed's family. Dan Clarke, Suffolk heritage officer, initiated a search for the book, and it turned up on a shelf in the museum office, next to more conventionally bound items. Clarke said: "We get things called museum losses, and it tends to be from the last century – things that have not been seen for a couple of decades. This would be considered a museum loss which has been found." While the book that has been on display in the museum since 1933 is completely bound in human skin, this newly discovered volume only has Corder's remains on the spine and the corners. "If you did not tell people it was bound in human skin, I do not really think you would realise," said Heritage assistant Abbie Smith. "It is also rather humbling to have something like that in the collection." *BBC News, 15 Apr 2025.*

MOYSE'S HALL MUSEUM / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: The second book bound in the skin of murderer William Corder is now on display in Moyse's Hall Museum after being found on a shelf in the office.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

292: GARDENER'S BEST FRIEND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Hedgehogs are heroes to horticulturalists because they spend every night patrolling your allotment, eating all the slugs and snails.

The "truth"

This long-standing and widely-held belief is flatly contradicted by everyone who actually studies hedgehog feeding through, for instance, analysing stomach contents and the composition of dung. Molluscs make up a very small part of the diet, not least because hog mouths are just too small to deal with snails or larger slugs. The bulk of a hedgehog's food consists of beetles, caterpillars, earthworms and earwigs. Hedgehogs are opportunistic feeders and will take slugs, but not by choice and not in great numbers. Research suggests that better candidates as garden mollusc destroyers are shrews, mice and rats.

Sources

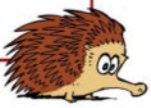
Jo King, author of *The Good Slug Guide* (Pimpernel Press 2024), writing in *Kitchen Garden* magazine May 2025; www.gardenersworld.com/wildlife/best-hedgehog-food/; www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2024/03/what-hedgehogs-eat/.

Disclaimer

Hedgehogs are a splendid thing to have around, both in and of themselves and as a source of human delight. If you can tell us anything new about their diet, we'll meet you next to the saucer of cat food at midnight. Or you could just write in.

Update

In **FT317:23** we wondered whether there were confirmed cases of works of art being disposed of by gallery cleaners who mistook them for rubbish. Our scepticism was unwarranted. The latest example (www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cnv58ejyrpzo) comes from Maashorst in the Netherlands, where authorities admitted it was "most likely" that 46 works, including a Warhol print, "were accidentally taken away with the trash" after being stored in wheelie bins in a basement during renovations. Not quite the same phenomenon as installations designed to look like trash being treated as trash, like the beer cans in Lisse, Netherlands (www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8705j33jyzo), but still pretty embarrassing.



NECROLOG

This month, we pay a fond tribute to two longtime FT contributors who used words and images to explore strange phenomena and unusual experiences

MERRILY HARPUR

My beloved sister and mentor, Merrily Harpur, died of cancer on 4 December 2024. She was a multi-talented writer, poet, artist and thinker of unusual wit, originality and clarity; but she laid less store by her gifts than by her ethics or, as I would say, virtues – she was unfailingly thoughtful, kind, generous and just.

After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, where she read English, she hit on the perfect job: cartoonist. Perfect because it combined her often mordant wit with her expressive drawings and immediately won her a place in national newspapers such as the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Evening Standard*, as well as the rare honour of a full page in *Punch* magazine with *The Nightmares of Dream Topping*, a satire on townies with second homes in the country. Her cartoons even appeared in many issues of *Fortean Times*. Perfect too because the job gave her the freedom to explore deeper interests such as the music, mores and fairylore of Ireland where she lived for many years before moving to West Dorset in order to fulfil her lifelong dream of becoming a landscape painter.

She was always interested in anomalous phenomena but in the 1980s she shifted focus from fairies to ufology, dragging me off to UFO conferences and buying a multitude of books on the subject – for which I was grateful when researching my book *Daimonic Reality*. We often discussed the continuity between fairy- and UFO-lore, a theme too little explored since Jacques Vallee's groundbreaking *Passport to Magonia*. At this time, too, an article by the indomitable Di Francis revived her interest in mystery big cats, which had intrigued her ever since the Surrey Puma rumours of our childhood. Merrily was soon careering off to ferret out her own witnesses of big cat sightings, eager to establish their reality. She also built a website for Dorset people to report their sightings and it was soon so full of reports that Dorset earned the reputation of being one of the most big-cat-rich areas in the UK. However, thanks to her friendship with John Michell, who wrote to her after reading her article on the subject in the *Times* ("Do a little more reading, dear," he suggested) she began to doubt the literal reality of these creatures and ended up writing the best single study of daimons I know of: *Mystery Big Cats* (2006). *Roaring Dorset* (2008) followed, a short book documenting eye-witness accounts of big cat sightings in her locality.

ROBIN MILLS

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

ABOVE LEFT: Merrily Harpur painting in Dorset. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Ted Harrison speaking to the UnConvention audience in 2011.

Merrily subscribed – and contributed – to *Fortean Times* for about 50 years, writing about Uri Geller, mystery cats, stoat packs and, in her last ever piece, our grandmother's mediumship. When she organised a group of old school friends to send copies of their most influential books to the school library in order to enlighten the poor contemporary pupils, she herself chose JW Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*, William Corliss's *Sourcebooks* and *The Complete Works of Charles Fort*.

Merrily Harpur, artist, cartoonist and writer; born 2 April 1948, Buckinghamshire; died 4 December 2025, Dorset, aged 76.

Patrick Harpur

TED HARRISON

Ted Harrison was a regular contributor to *Fortean Times* over many years, although FT readers may not be familiar with all of his achievements; for Ted, as well as a chronicler of religious oddities, was many other things during the course of his life.

Born Edward Peter Graham Harrison, the son of an Anglican priest and a nurse, he went to the University of Kent at Canterbury to take a BA in Politics, Economics and Sociology. Here, he met and married Helen, his wife of 57 years, and also started on his career in journalism as a graduate trainee on the *Kent Messenger*. He went on to work as a radio and television broadcaster for the BBC and ITV, becoming BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent in the 1980s and a familiar voice on Radio 4 for many years. By the early 1990s Ted had also founded his own production company, Pilgrim Productions Canterbury, making documentaries on religious and other subjects.

He returned to the University of Kent in 1992 to undertake a PhD in Theology, focusing on stigmata – a subject that had earlier attracted his attention as a journalist and resulted in two books, *Marks of the Cross* (1981) and *Stigmata: A Medieval Mystery in a Modern Age* (1994). The latter was a fortean take on the subject, examining modern claims of stigmatic phenomena through multiple perspectives – medical, historical, sociological, theological – without offering tidy explanations of either a supernatural or debunking kind. It was an open-minded approach that Ted would bring to his subsequent books on fortean topics and his many FT articles. Another subject he made his own was the growth of quasi-religious cults around dead celebrities such as Elvis and Diana, Princess of Wales; he made programmes and wrote books about both (*Diana, Icon and Sacrifice*, 1998; *The Death and Resurrection of Elvis Presley*, 2016) as well as contributing articles on these and other 'celebrity saints' for FT.

Ted became an occasional contributor to FT in the mid-1990s, and a regular one from the early 2000s. A glance at the titles of his 50-plus articles over the years reveals both the variety of his interests and the restless, questioning nature of his mind: stigmata (of course); Jesus in Britain; weeping BVMs; the Toronto Blessing; signs in the sky; the history of exorcism; blind artists; the Nanteos Cup; End Time prophecies; holy wells; the Star of Bethlehem; the Rapture; Eucharistic miracles; life after death; mystical dimensions of the number 40; glossolalia; lotteries; the Nephilim; and the Red Heifer of Jerusalem – the Apocalypse Cow. Ted was also a hugely popular speaker at the FT UnConventions over the years, regaling audiences with learned and amusing talks on stigmatics, failed predictions of the apocalypse and more.

And he was still looking for new ways to explore the world. He'd had an early gift for drawing, particularly cartoons, and in 2010 gained an MA in fine art. As he put it: "My working life involved asking lots of questions about faith, religion and the numinous. I started using words but found them increasingly inadequate – so I switched to the visual arts." The result was an outpouring of works on religious themes exhibited in churches and cathedrals around Britain; in 2011, his installation 'Innocence Betrayed', made from thousands of red paper poppies, was displayed in St Paul's Cathedral, and permanent installations remain in place at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in London.

It was at Guy's that Ted, who had suffered from renal problems since the 1980s, received a kidney transplant in 1990. Initially, it failed – until after four weeks, at Easter, it began to work. By the time of his death, Ted was one of the longest surviving kidney-transplant recipients in the world. As he wrote of his 'miracle': "Perhaps faith is not blindly accepting the unprovable, but graciously accepting the unknown."

Ted, and his gracious explorations of the unknown, will be greatly misssed by us all.

Ted Harrison, writer, artist, broadcaster, producer; born Herne Bay, Kent, 14 April 1948, died Aberystwyth, 3 Jan 2025, aged 76.

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

WALES'S WATERY RESTORER

March 1850. The Brecon Beacons. A courtroom. The defence lawyer, Mr Grove, has little to work with, until he turns to Hugh Williams, the chief prosecution witness. Can you, Hugh, see in the dark? asks Grove. Hugh says "Yes." Have you seen ghosts? "Yes," says Hugh again. And now the court becomes silent. Mr Grove prods a little more and Hugh tells his story. He met the ghost of a local gentleman, Mr William Isherwood, on a bridge near the Usk. There was a strange light; the hedges were ablaze. The ghost first appeared as a black dog, then as a man. It was unmistakably Mr Isherwood, who had died at Llwyn-cyntefin the year before. The ghost spoke to Hugh, and then flew with him across the countryside to the Home Counties. (Mr Isherwood was from Buckinghamshire.) They came to a house. Inside were pistols. Hugh was told to take them. The two flew back to the Usk where their adventure had begun. High above the water, Hugh dropped the weapons into the Usk.

The judge commented that testimony from "a man who laboured under such illusions and hallucinations of mind respecting ghosts and impossibilities" could not be relied upon, particularly in a capital case. But for our purposes, Hugh's story is remarkable. And while the judge might have heard madness, local tradition suggests something else.

Southern and central Wales has long known a very particular type of ghost, the watery restorer (WR). The WR returns to the living not to haunt, but to tie up loose ends. They appear at bridges, in fields or on staircases, and insist that a certain object, usually money, sometimes weapons or tools, be retrieved and disposed of. There are ghosts like this in England, but the WR strangely insists that the material be cast into a river or lake. The WR also flies with its human intermediary to help them do the disposing: other British ghosts don't fly with people. One man from nearby Ystrad Gynlas was flown to Pennsylvania to fetch a few half-crowns hidden beneath a floorboard! A woman in the Rhondda was led through the air with a carpenter's tool to drop in the river. Many accounts were published – I know of perhaps two dozen.

A WOMAN IN THE RHONDDA WAS LED THROUGH THE AIR WITH A CARPENTER'S TOOL TO DROP IN THE RIVER

Hugh's flight with Mr Isherwood fits the pattern precisely. Was Hugh mad? A blowhard? A super experiencer? We will never know. But his story describes perfectly the WR model. Why the water? I have no idea, but I can't help think of Excalibur and golden sacrifices being hurled into the depths by the ancient British. For the WR, the water seems to have been a way to 'kill' the object and hence the sin.

Simon Young has brought out, with Davide Ermacora, *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings: European Traditions.*

They want to believe...

NIGEL WATSON asks why prominent military, political and scientific figures go public with UFO stories

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS

On the 60th anniversary of the Roswell crash in July 2007, the "deathbed" affidavit of Walter G Haut, who was a public information officer at the Roswell Army Air Field, was released. Dated 26 December 2002, the key part of this testimony was that Haut was personally taken to Building 84 (AKA Hangar P-3), by the base commander Col. Blanchard. He states: "Once inside, I was permitted from a safe distance to first observe the object just recovered north of town. It was approx. 12 to 15 feet in length, not quite as wide, about 6 feet high, and more of an egg shape. Lighting was poor, but its surface did appear metallic. No windows, portholes, wings, tail section, or landing gear were visible.

"Also from a distance, I was able to see a couple of bodies under a canvas tarpaulin. Only the heads extended beyond the covering, and I was not able to make out any features. The heads did appear larger than normal and the contour of the canvas suggested the size of a 10 year old child."

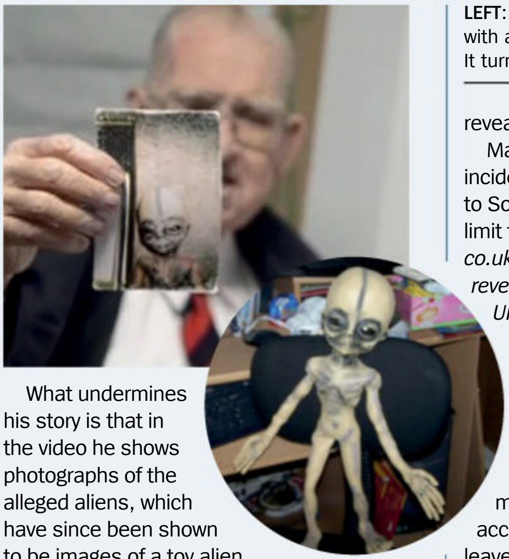
Haut concluded: "I am convinced that what I personally observed was some type of craft and its crew from outer space."

The problem with this document is that it was composed by ufologist Donald R Schmitt and emailed to Haut to sign. In several interviews prior to his death on 15 December 2005, Haut often seemed confused, and in an interview with Larry King in 2003 when asked directly if he ever saw any wreckage he replied: "No."

MAD SCIENTIST?

Before his death in August 2014, aged 78, Boyd Bushman, who was a senior scientist at Lockheed Martin, made a video in which he claimed he worked on antigravity projects and examined at least eight different types of alien spacecraft. He said the aliens fly their craft on a special flightpath that takes them through a shaft drilled on the side of a mountain near Area 51. Furthermore, the creators of these craft were 230-year-old humanoid aliens from the planet Quintumnia who lived at Area 51. Bushman also revealed that he had received death threats and that security personnel had attempted to discredit him and tried to keep him from talking to the public.

It is true that there were concerns that Bushman had suspicious foreign contacts, to the extent that the FBI investigated his activities. In one report they note that a Lockheed Martin employee said that he fitted the "mad scientist" stereotype – egocentric and with an intense desire for personal recognition.



LEFT: Lockheed Martin scientist Boyd Bushman with a photo of a purported alien. **BELOW LEFT**: It turmed out be an alien doll sold by Walmart.

What undermines his story is that in the video he shows photographs of the alleged aliens, which have since been shown to be images of a toy alien doll sold by Walmart.

Knowing Bushman's interest in UFOs and antigravity, it is possible pranksters and ufologists fed him with photographs and stories about Area 51 that he came to believe. On a more sinister note it has been suggested he was targeted by a foreign agency in order to illicit classified Lockheed Martin or US Government information. *documents.theblackvault.com/;documents/fbifiles/paranormal/BoydBushman-1306337-0.pdf; ufotrail.blogspot.com/2019/04/ufos-as-espionage-tools.html*

OTHERWORLDLY CRAFT

Harald Malmgren, an advisor to John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, decided "for the sake of history" to share what he knew about UAPs before his death on 13 February 2025. He told his daughter, Dr Pippa Malmgren, that he saw a video of a white orb circling a missile after its test launch on 25 October 1962, and that the X-ray machine in the rocket's nose cone caused the orb to crash into the sea where it was recovered by the US Navy.

In a Twitter/X posting in August 2024, he said that he was "informally briefed on 'otherworld technologies' by CIA's Richard Bissell (who had been in charge of Skunkworks, Area 51, Los Alamos, etc.) but sworn to secrecy."

In 1963 the regional chief of the Atomic Energy Commission, Lawrence Preston Gise, grandfather of Jeff Bezos, handed Harald a piece of a crashed otherworldly craft. On touching it, Malmgren heard a voice begin talking to him inside his head, but he never revealed what it said.

Malmgren also claimed that these incidents caused John F Kennedy to reach out to Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev, to limit the Cold War arms race. *www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14524339/JFK-advisor-reveals-US-Navy-secretly-shot-retrieved-orb-UFO-1962-missile-test.html*

ANONYMOUS POSTER

Being given only eight months to live, an anonymous Department of Defense contractor has decided to spill the beans on Reddit. He says we have mastered anti-gravity to the extent that, according to him, "operational craft... can leave our solar system. It sounds nuts, but it is the truth. Some have succeeded by means of pure human ingenuity, and others did it with access to recovered UAP materials." He goes on to state: "I was involved in a project that utilised Tesla Turbines, Plasma Toroid chambers, Microwaves, Crystals, extremely strong Rotating Magnets, and various other obtainable components that generated many kilowatts of gravitational waves (or "gravitons" as some call it) in a private BaE Lab."

Whistleblowers like Dave Grusch, Jake Barber and Mike Herrera are considered "the real deal" and he praises the work of Tom Bearden, who designed a perpetual motion engine called the Motionless Electromagnetic Generator (MEG) and who put forward crank ideas about suppressed zero energy technology (see **FT25:49-50, 26:14-20, 378:14**). No new evidence is provided and the cloak-and-dagger nature of the post combined with the research into gravitational waves and the like, barely disguises the fact this is an update of Bushman's UFO fantasies. *reddit.com/r/UFOs/comments/1kh91tq/i_was_a_private_contractor_for_various_dod*

MOTIVES

The motives for such stories can be varied; they could just be the mutterings of those who want to believe and be part of the UFO narrative, hoaxes, or the product of deliberate misinformation. Another motive could be the desire to please friends and family who strongly want their UFO beliefs to be confirmed. For an example, check out Jerry Blair's deathbed confirmation of his wife's humanoid sighting at Pascagoula in 1973 (see **FT455:36-37**). *Beyond Pascagoula by Irena Scott, Flying Disk Press, 2020, p.41.*

Strangers in the night

JENNY RANDLES says that elements of the UFO mystery may be old phenomena in modern clothes

The paranormal is a wide-ranging subject filled with myths, legends and modern day encounters. We tend to forget when investigating UFOs that we only see a modern snapshot of a phenomenon only put down to 'flying saucers' just after World War II. However, we should heed the lessons of the past, where folklore evolves across centuries, not mere decades, and notice that it contains both constant elements and others that seem to modernise to fit the culture of the day.

Crop circles are an obvious example. Odd patterns in farmers' fields were not new in the early 1980s when they started to make headlines; they just got noticed and became part of the 'space age' UFO mystery, thus radically shifting popular assumptions about what caused them. They morphed in interpretation ('obviously' caused by pesky aliens) and became an opportunity for tricksters who saw that adding an alien element to the mystery would bring greater media attention.

However, we do not seem to have learned the wider lesson of the crop circle fad: that the mysteries of the past have not gone away – they just redesign themselves with the help of human imagination.

There's another phenomenon that has been recorded for centuries, but has been 'adapted' to make it fit into modern UFO folklore, with a recognisable, age-old set of events simply put into an alien context: bedroom visitors. Awakening in the night to see a strange figure in your bedroom is an extremely common experience – and it didn't previously feature UFOs.

It's 2.20 am in an ordinary house in Manchester. Len is reading in bed while his wife has gone to sleep beside him. He does not want to put the book down, but is so tired he keeps rereading the same line. So he gives in to the call of sleep. However, as he tries to enter slumber, the room changes from dark to bright, as if the Moon is shining into his eyes. Len assumes that is what it is and surrenders to tiredness, unaware of what strange things are happening in his body, symptoms of a term he has never heard of – The Oz Factor.

As he later put it: "I knew something weird was happening to my body, but not what. I could not hear the clock ticking and it was only a foot away. It was like everything had just stood still." He was experiencing a mental state common to many close encounters, a kind of sensory limbo in which we start to think Moon-like lights may be something weirder – and begin to consider paranormal phenomena.

LEFT: Debbie Watling as Vicky in *Doctor Who*.

Debbie's real life was arguably more remarkable than some of the *Doctor Who* scripts

Suddenly Len sees a figure in his room moving slowly to the foot of the bed on the side where his sleeping wife lies. He tries to tell himself it's their child sleepwalking, but it isn't. Only now does Len recognise the man standing by the bed. It is the famous movie star Tyrone Power, who had died in 1958 when working on the film *Solomon and Sheba*.

'Tyrone' is wearing a white robe and after getting over the sheer astonishment Len calls out: "What's going on?" Tyrone stares at him with eyes like car headlamps. He looks not like a ghost in the movies, but as if he were alive. Len thinks he could touch him if he dared.

Now sure he is wide awake – and terrified – Len tries to get his wife to see the apparition now heading out of the room (via the door, like a human). But she is still in a deep sleep, even when he shakes her. Len finally gets his wife to wake up. "It was Tyrone Power I saw," he tells her. "Even if I die tonight, that is true."

Len struggled to get over this event and slept with the light on for a long time afterward. Why did his vision involve a movie star he had never met? Perhaps he somehow picked up on a fantasy dream his wife was having; after all, Tyrone Power was a handsome man.

A few weeks after Len had recovered enough to try to sleep in the dark, it happened again; though not via Hollywood this time. He awoke to find a stranger in black clothes at the end of the bed who disappeared immediately. The next morning an urgent message arrived to tell Len his brother had died.

I have heard many witnesses tell me of their bedroom visitors (both before and after close encounters) which they interpret as aliens, not movie stars.

An interesting and not dissimilar account comes from actress Debbie Watling, who experienced strange lights in her bedroom as a child. She again described what appears to be the Oz Factor state of consciousness, starting with total silence in her bedroom. Yet as the experiences happened frequently, she became aware of physical paralysis, suggesting she was in a state of deep sleep with her body naturally restricted but her consciousness lucid.

So why are lights and glows common in these experiences? What are they? And why are they commonly associated with UFO encounters that turn into alien contacts – even if these only come to light when regression hypnosis seeks to tease them out of the hidden recesses of the mind?

There are clear connections between Len and his movie star encounter, UFO witnesses who see aliens on waking in the night, and Debbie's accounts (which actually involved a demonic figure that was half goat, half man).

Ironically for Debbie her 'alien contact' extended to her acting life. Debbie played Vicky, the companion of the second Doctor in the long running BBC series *Doctor Who* back in the 1960s. In this case, her real life was arguably more remarkable than some of the scripts. Of course, *Fortean Times* has featured in *Doctor Who*, when the 13th doctor, played by Jodie Whittaker, confronted the Master – who was keeping tracks on where aliens were landing via a collection of back issues of FT! (**FT389:2**.)

UFO researchers often treat these kinds of accounts too literally, inferring that such experiences must be alien encounters. Aliens certainly appear in bedroom encounter cases more often today, but probably as a modern interpretation of an age-old experience deeply rooted in human consciousness. Whether these visitors are really from the stars, from Hell, or even Hollywood, they may provide valuable clues about realms which, as yet, we struggle to explain.

JAPANESE TOILET GHOSTS

Many cultures have traditions of toilet-adjacent spirits, but Japan boasts more than most. **LAURA MAURO** explores haunted toilets in Japanese culture, a tradition that stretches from classical folklore to postwar urban legends and contemporary films and computer games

Kitakami City, Japan, 1948. An elementary school student enters the school bathroom alone. Her friends are waiting for her outside; it's a beautiful spring day, and lunch period is almost over. A row of empty stalls line the back wall. She heads to the furthest stall, intending to be quick. As she does, a soft voice emerges from behind the half-closed door of the third stall.

It says: "*Hanako-san of the third stall.*"

This is, of course, quite impossible. The toilet is empty, the stall door ajar; the girl can plainly see nobody is there. But the voice had been unmistakable. Perplexed, she approaches the stall, tentatively pushing back the door – surely it must be a prank, the perpetrator hiding just out of sight. But there is nobody. Only the ceramic squat toilet, set into the floor of the stall. The girl chalks it up to her imagination, but she can't seem to shake her sudden sense of unease. Anxious to escape that eerie voice, she turns to leave, and as she does, a pair of bone-white hands reach from the bowels of the toilet, grabbing the poor unsuspecting girl and pulling her all the way down to hell…

この学校の怪談が一番怖い。
「この学校はさ、花子さんを見た人がいると必ず誰かが死ぬんだって」
監督／堤 幸彦
脚本／高橋 洋
前田 愛
浜丘麻矢
大村彩子
監督:堤 幸彦
「金田一少年の事件簿」
ジャパニーズ・ホラーの最強スタッフが集結!
脚本:高橋 洋
「リング」「女優霊」
新生トイレの花子さん
SCHOOL MYSTERY
全国劇場公開作品
TOEI VIDEO

LEFT: Yukihiko Tsutsumi's 1998 film *Shinsei Toire no Hanako-san*. **FACING PAGE:** Hanako-san as imagined by artist and folklorist Matthew Meyer.

HANAKO-SAN OF THE TOILET

So goes what many believe to be the first recorded version of *Toire no Hanako-san* ("Hanako of the Toilet"), an urban legend which has been circulating throughout schools in Japan for over half a century.[1] Eminent folklorist Miyoko Matsutani recounted this particular version in her *Gendai minwa ko* ("Modern Folk Tales") series, though there are as many variants of the tale as there are school bathrooms.

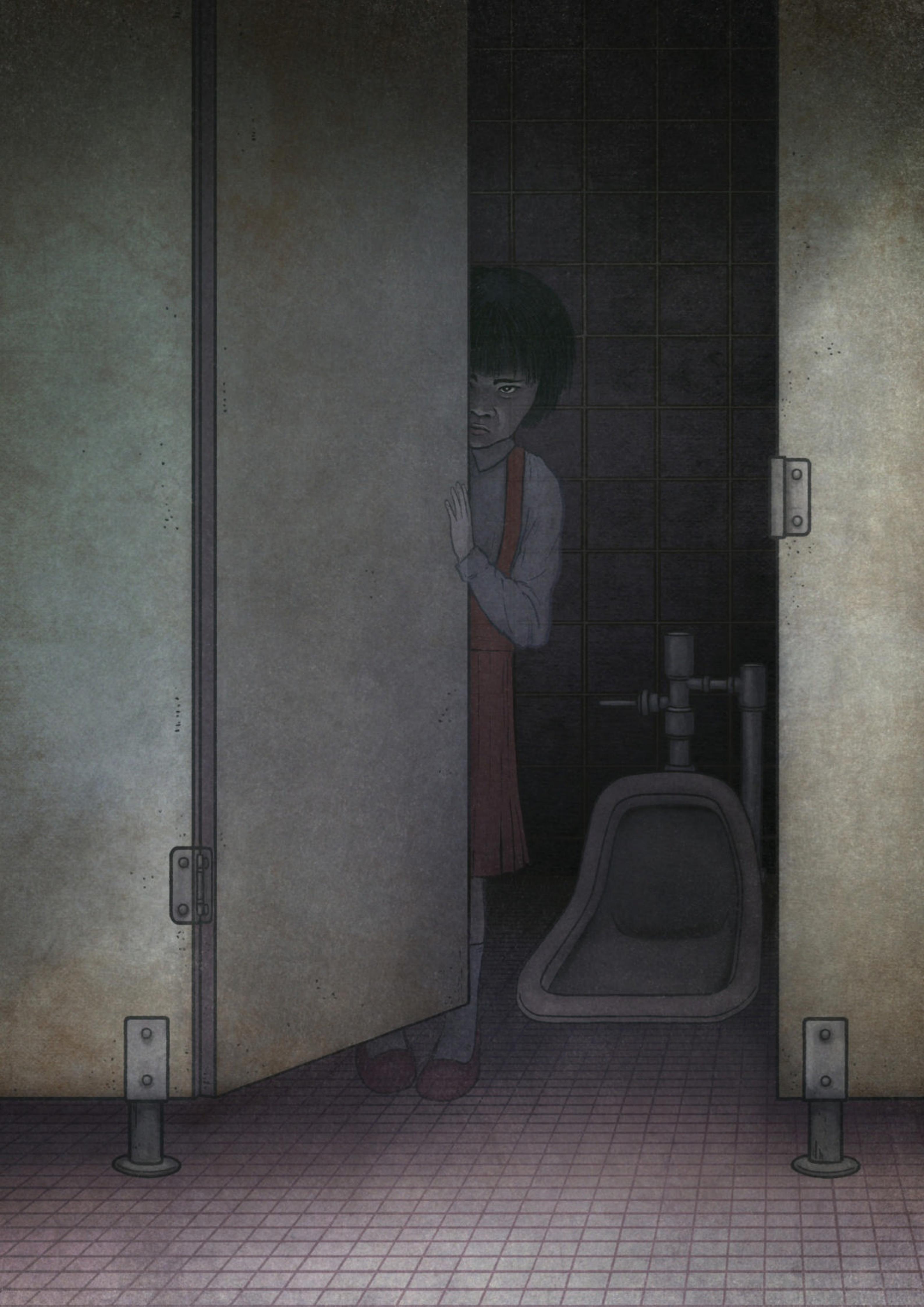
A PAIR OF BONE-WHITE HANDS REACH FROM THE TOILET, GRABBING THE UNSUSPECTING GIRL

It seems that every prefecture in Japan has its own version of the Hanako-san legend. Unlike the spontaneous manifestation in the original tale, most modern versions stipulate that Hanako must be summoned in a ritual reminiscent of Bloody Mary – the West's own legendary toilet ghost (see **FT432:40-43**). To summon her, one must step into the girls' toilet, usually on the third floor, and knock three times on the door of the third stall, reciting the phrase: "Are you there, Hanako-san?" If Hanako is present, she'll respond: "Yes, I am."

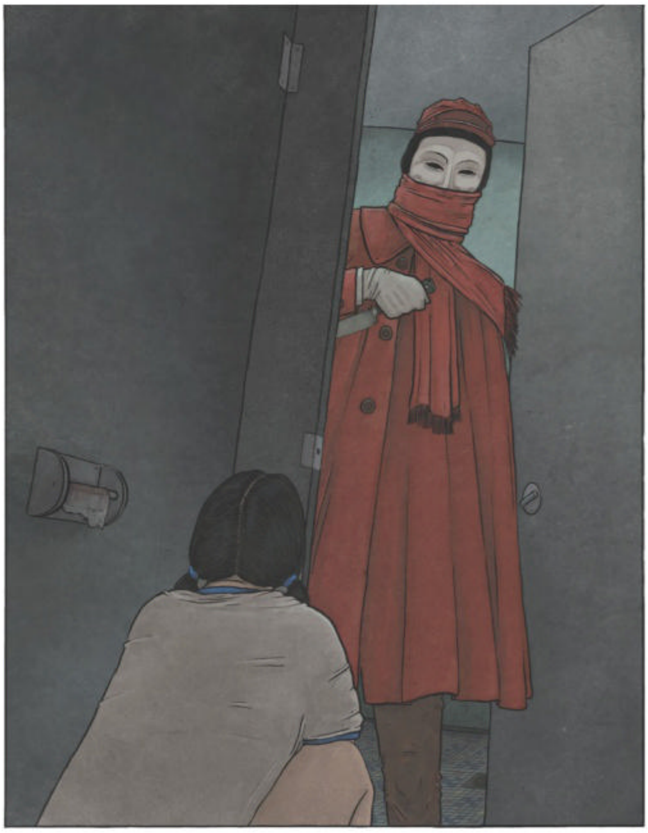
What happens next depends on the version of the story.[2] Sometimes, the stall door opens, and the ghost of Hanako-san – a young girl in an old-fashioned red dress, with a bob haircut – will reach out and drag you down the toilet. In Yamagata Prefecture, the stall is inhabited not by a little girl, but a three-headed lizard, who eats the questioner. In Iwate prefecture, it's a disembodied white hand; in Kanagawa prefecture, a bloody red hand. In a version of the tale from Shimane prefecture, Hanako asks unwary visitors to the bathroom if they'd like to play with her; if they say yes, she pulls them into the toilet. If they say no, the slighted Hanako cuts them to pieces. *Damned if you do and damned if you don't* is a common theme in Japanese urban legends.

Hanako's origins are similarly various, though we can be sure of one thing: her death was violent and unjust. She might be the ghost of a young girl who was killed

MATTHEW MEYER / YOKAI.COM



in an air raid during the war, or a girl who suffered parental abuse; a girl who was bullied into taking her own life, or who was chased into the toilet by a pervert and murdered there.[3] There is, it seems, an almost infinite supply of Hanakos, with infinite points of origin. Even her name speaks to the ubiquity of her presence: Hanako is a timelessly popular name for a girl who could conceivably originate from anywhere in Japan, in almost any era.



MATTHEW MEYER / YOKAI.COM

LEFT: Matthew Meyer's version of the Aka Manto legend. **BELOW LEFT:** A modern replica of an Edo-era Japanese toilet in the Museum of the Toyko Metropolitan Bureau of Waterworks.

Hanako's story has been in circulation since the immediate post-war era, though it rose to prominence sometime in the 1980s – a fertile decade for *toshi densetsu*, or urban legends. It's unclear why exactly this was such a boom era for creepy stories, though translator Zack Davisson points to the 1979 panic surrounding the *Kuchisake-onna* (slit-mouthed woman) as a potential catalyst.[4] She is believed to be the malevolent spirit (or *onryo*) of a brutally mutilated woman; the story allegedly began with a single sighting in Gifu Prefecture, and quickly spread like wildfire across Japan, mutating into something akin to mass hysteria. Even national newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* reported on the story; children were herded to and from school by paranoid teachers, and a woman was arrested in the summer of 1979 for wandering the streets with a knife, apparently to scare children with. By August of 1979, with schoolchildren on summer break and therefore no longer serving as the vectors for infectious terror, the story had all but vanished into thin air.

AKA MANTO IS A MALEVOLENT SPIRIT ALSO SAID TO INHABIT SCHOOL BATHROOMS

While dark alleys and city streets may be standard settings for urban legends, the toilet is perhaps a less obvious location. Nonetheless, Hanako finds herself in rich contemporaneous company, and of respectable historical pedigree. Take Aka Manto ("red cape"), a malevolent spirit also said to inhabit school bathrooms, particularly seldom-used ones, such as the older squat-style toilets. As in the original Hanako-san story, Aka Manto appears unprompted; a disembodied voice which asks the unwitting toilet-goer whether they would like blue or red paper. It doesn't much matter what they answer; choosing red paper results in flaying, dismemberment or some other violently bloody demise, while blue paper offers the unenviable alternative of strangulation, or else immediate exsanguination, leaving the body empty of blood.[5] And don't think you can game the outcome by responding with a trick answer, or bringing your own paper – Aka Manto will simply provide a different, but equally grisly end.

Not all versions of the Aka Manto legend are quite so violent. A version recounted by folklorist Matthew Meyer offers the alternative dichotomy of red or white paper; according to Meyer, choosing red results in a red tongue rising from the toilet to lick the answerer's bottom, while choosing white summons a disembodied hand – a motif which recurs not only in the Hanako-san tale, but in far older stories.[6]

CHRIS 73 / CREATIVE COMMONS

Some sources suggest that the legend of Aka Manto actually predates that of Hanako-san. Versions have been recorded as far back as the 1930s; the 'manto' of his name likely refers to a type of sleeveless kimono worn during that period.

There is a third, somewhat more obscure toilet ghost, who also originates roughly from the post-war period. Kashima Reiko, the vengeful *onryo* of a woman said to haunt train station bathrooms. One version of her story suggests she was a woman from Hokkaido who was assaulted by an American GI and thrown onto railway tracks. Her legless spirit accosts occupants of the stall, demanding to know where her missing limbs are. Upon receipt of an inevitably unsatisfactory answer, she will tear off the occupant's legs in retaliation. There is, however, a rare get-out clause: if the occupant answers that her legs are on the Meishin Expressway, she will leave them alone.[7] It is therefore by the narrowest of margins that Kashima-san may be the least worst toilet ghost to be accosted by.

TOILET GODS, TOILET MONSTERS

To say that toilet ghosts are a uniquely Japanese phenomenon would be to tread the thin line of exoticisation – and incorrect besides, as the likes of Bloody Mary and Moaning Myrtle demonstrate. It is, however, intriguing to note that no other culture seems to have quite as vibrant and storied a tradition of bathroom spirits, nor one with such a lengthy genealogy.

If urban legends are a kind of modern folklore, then it seems logical that Hanako-san and company should find their precedents in classical Japanese legend. In 2020, research institute Japan Toilet Labo conducted a study into toilet-based folklore across Japan.[8] Their results were fascinating: 194 cases of ghosts and/or monsters associated with the word 'latrine', 50 cases associated with the modern word 'toilet', and a further 56 scattered across various old-fashioned Japanese words all referring to a toilet of some kind. Furthermore, a thematic consistency was observed: being harmed on the toilet by some inexplicable presence was the most common, with bad luck inflicted by going to the toilet during a particular time coming second. The humble bathroom, it seems, is quite a scary place.

But the toilet is not solely the domain of the strange and monstrous. Belief in the

PHOKIN / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

東司の護神
うずさま明王堂

ERIC LAFFORGUE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: A statue of Ususama-myo-o enshrined near the restroom at Sojiji Temple in Kawasaki, Japan. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The toilet god has his very own temple, Myotoku-ji in Izu City, Shizuoka Prefecture. **BELOW:** And for the dedicated follower of Japan's toilet god, Ususama-myo-o toilet paper is available.

kawaya-no-kami – the "god of the toilet" – dates back to early modern Japan,[9] when the typical toilet consisted of a privy built over a hole in the ground, or above a river. With only two boards separating the toilet-goer from the river below, it's probably not surprising that a host of strange creatures (better known as *yokai*) have sprung up, personifying the danger inherent in such a precarious setup.

Belief in the *kawaya-no-kami* persists into the present day. Japanese rental property website Hanasakasu informs its readership that keeping their toilet clean will improve their luck, "both physically and mentally";[10] some Japanese temples sell *ofuda* (talismans usually made from wood or paper) to hang in one's toilet, specifically to honour the god who dwells there. During his acceptance speech at the 1997 Venice Film Festival, legendary actor and director 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano is said to have claimed that he had followed a fortune-teller's advice to clean his toilet daily, thereby bringing him good fortune. There is even a famous song, "Toire no Kamisama" by Japanese singer Uemura Kana, a 10-minute epic ballad dedicated to her grandmother's earnest belief in the "beautiful goddess of the toilet"; in 2010, it was one of the most viewed YouTube videos in Japan.[11]

Toire-no-kamisama (a more modern term for the god of the toilet) is surrounded by mysterious superstitions. It's said that if your toilet is clean, you'll give birth to a beautiful child; a dirty toilet will guarantee an ugly, unhappy one. If a pregnant woman cleans the toilet – or perhaps makes an offering of food to the *toire-no-kamisama* – she'll have an easier time during childbirth. These beliefs may seem quite strange, but when you consider that the 'night soil' collected from outhouses was often used as fertiliser in pre-modern Japan,[12] the link between fertility and toilets becomes slightly less baffling.

It doesn't end there. It's possible to trace the link even further back, to the Buddhist deity Ususama-myo-o. He is one of several *myo-o*, or deities, with the ability to purify the impure. I'm sure you can see where this is going.

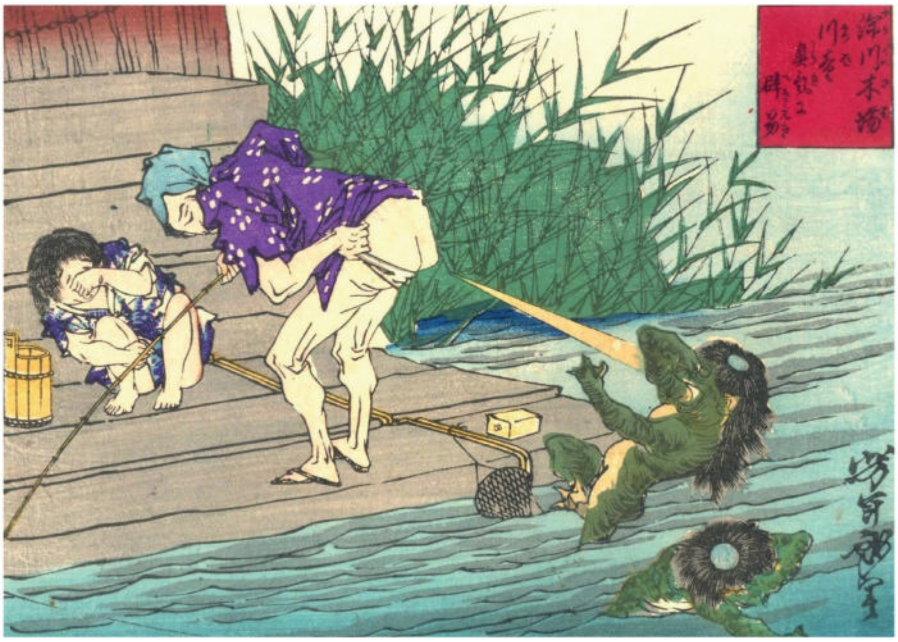
Ususama-myo-o has his very own temple in Izu City, Shizuoka Prefecture.[13] Myotoku-ji Temple is dedicated to the *toire-no-kamisama*; visitors pray for good digestive health by stepping over a symbolic squat toilet, and can also pray to be spared from sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive issues. Allegedly, one can purchase underpants-shaped talismans, presumably to hang in one's own personal *toire-no-kamisami* temple. Ususama-myo-o is not only able to purify the toilet, though. It's said he was able to change a female fœtus into a male – a belief circulated during the Heian period, where sons were venerated above daughters. Thus, the link between the toilet and childbirth becomes a great deal less murky.

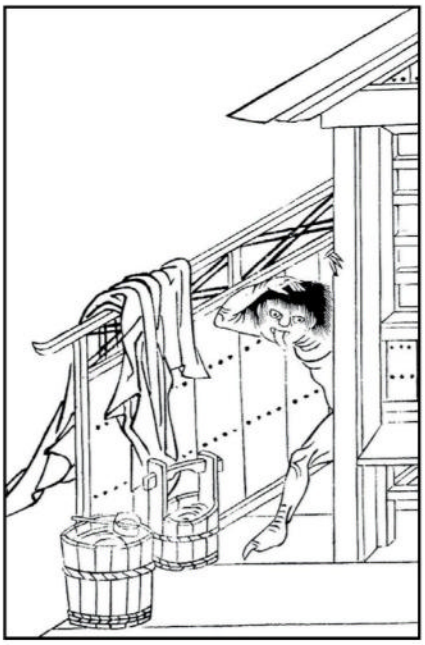
The *kawaya-no-kami* is generally a benevolent presence, but he presents esoteric hazards of his own. Ususama-myo-o was said to have many arms – six or eight, depending on the depiction – one of which carried a great red spear. The tale travelled and mutated, as folklore is wont to do, until in some regions he became the blind, spear-wielding *kawaya-no-kami*. Since Japanese toilets were, in those days, entirely of the squatting type, one can imagine the kind of danger presented here. And so the ritual of clearing one's throat before entering the toilet became commonplace in those regions, allowing the god time to sheath his spear, thereby avoiding disaster.[14]

It's not a huge leap of logic to see how we might go from spear-wielding toilet protectorate to disembodied hands rising out of the toilet. But there is an intermediary, in the form of the previously mentioned *yokai*. An umbrella term for a wide variety of Japanese supernatural beings, *yokai* are immensely important to Japanese folklore and contemporary culture alike, with manga, anime, videogames and even cute mascots paying knowing tribute to their spooky forefathers (a not-insignificant proportion of the 1,000+ Pokémon currently in circulation are directly inspired by *yokai*;[15] one might go as far as to say that the entire concept of Pokémon likely owes its genesis to Japan's rich taxonomy of *yokai*).

There are multiple *yokai* historically associated with toilets. The most famous is the turtle-like *kappa*, accused in many prefectures of harassing people in the latrine. The river-going *kappa* likely finds its mischievous origins in the *kawaya*, a type of primitive toilet built over a river or stream. A *kappa* might variously grope

うずさま明王
運をつけるスペース





ABOVE LEFT: What to do if a *kappa* comes after your *shirikodama*, in a print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The filth-licking akaname in Toriyama Sekien's 18th century supernatural bestiary *Gazu Hyakki Yagy* ("The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Demons"). **BELOW:** A *kainade* from the Fukagawa Edo Museum's "Obake no Sumika" exhibition, and a toilet hand from *The Legend of Zelda* videogame

FRED CHERRYGARDEN / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

unwary bottoms, or pull their victims into the water with them, where they are drowned so that the *kappa* can eat their liver. Worse still, the *kappa* may come after your *shirikodama*, a kind of magical ball containing a person's soul, which is located in their anus. Fortunately there are many ways to circumvent a *kappa* attack, from bowing deeply in greeting – the *kappa* is a polite sort of miscreant, and will bow back, thereby spilling the water contained in the *sara* (dish) atop its head and rendering it immobile – to offering it its favourite food, the humble cucumber.

Also found in the annals of Japanese toilet history is the *kurote* (literally "black hand"), a disembodied hand which rises from the toilet to stroke unguarded bottoms. Its origins are less clear than the kappa, and it is nowhere near as ubiquitous; it is typically found in stories from the Noto peninsula of western Japan, in which it has a tendency to menace the wives of samurai. Nonetheless, the 'hand rising from the toilet' motif has certainly been impactful, recurring not only in the story of Hanako-san, but also in three separate games in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise. Here, the toilet-hand reaches out from the bowl and asks the game's protagonist, Link, for toilet paper, rewarding him if he provides it.

There's also the *kainade* – a similar ghostly hand lurking in squat toilets – which is sometimes said to appear solely on Setsubun, a festival held on the day before spring begins. Some versions of the Aka Manto story blame the *kainade*; in these versions, the grisly end is replaced by a hand of the chosen colour rising to stroke the student's behind. The imp-like *kamakiri* is accused in an 1874 story of cutting the hair of a servant girl when she used the outhouse of her master's mansion; like the *kuchisake-onna* story, this incident was even reported in the Tokyo *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*.[16]

Pa-Pa-Pa-Paper, please!

Then there's the *kanbari nyudo*, a kind of bizarre perverted priest-like being, which lurks outside toilets on New Year's Eve and peeks through the window. The *kanbari nyudo* is said to bring bad luck, or inflict constipation, but there's a version of the tale which suggests it can be summoned, similar to Hanako-san, in order to bring good fortune.[17] If a person enters the toilet on New Year's Eve at the hour of the ox (between 1 and 3am), and chants *kanbari nyudo* three times, a human head will appear in the toilet. Assuming you've not run away in terror, you must then take that head, place it into the left sleeve of your kimono, and take it back out, whereupon it will have turned into a gold coin. One wonders how this clause was first discovered.

Rounding out our cohort is the filth-licking *akaname*. A goblin-like beast which exclusively inhabits dirty bathrooms, it doesn't menace humans, instead using its long tongue to lap up muck and grime. It does, however, spread disease – so a clean bathroom is essential should you wish to keep the *akaname* at bay.

ONE HUNDRED STORIES

Are Hanako-san and company *yokai*? This is a thorny question, fiercely debated by folklorists and scholars of *yokaigaku*, a field of study created by Inoue Enryo in the late 1800s. Perhaps an early fortean of sorts, Inoue believed that there were 'false mysteries' (*kakai*) and 'true mysteries' (*shinkai*): folk beliefs, he posited, were false mysteries, phenomena which could be rationally explained and therefore demystified, and to place stock in the supernatural was to muddy the waters of 'true mystery' – that which truly transcends reason.[18] *Yokai*, according to Inoue, were false mysteries – folk beliefs created to explain phenomena that were not yet understood.

An older word for *yokai* is *bakemono* – literally 'changing thing', referring generally to shapeshifting entities. *Bakemono* were popular subjects during the Edo era, appearing in such varied art forms as Kabuki theatre, *ukiyo-e* and *kaidan*. The latter were essentially spooky stories, generally recounted orally as part of the *hyaku-monogatari* ('one hundred stories'): a kind of parlour game which took the form of a candlelit gathering, during which guests would take it in turns to tell stories. With each story, a candle was extinguished, until there remained a single candle. When this was extinguished, it was said something spooky would emerge from the darkness. In this way, we could view Hanako and her contemporaries as a kind of modern version of the *kaidan* tradition.

ョーツ
1,200
女性 五分長
ベージュ
M 800円
L 900円
LL1000円
ズロース
M 800
900
1000
トランクス
ボクサーブリーフ
M 1枚 800円
トランクス
ボクサーブリーフ
L1枚 800円
トランクス
ボクサーブリーフ
LL1枚

ERIC LAFFORGUE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: It's good to know that if gods, ghosts or *yokai* have caused you an underwear emergency, voluminous pants are on sale at Myotoku-ji temple.

In the same way that Hanako et al have inspired countless films, videogames and manga, so the *kaidan* of the Edo era spawned what Zack Davisson refers to as a "cottage industry" of printed volumes. These *kaidan-shu* were originally appended with messages of Buddhist morality, but this was short-lived, as entertainment became the priority (and quality, inevitably, took a back seat to quantity). Some of these stories were immortalised in the West by Greek-Irish scholar Lafcadio Hearn, whose 1904 book *Kwaidan* was perhaps the first example of what we now call J-Horror.

Contemporary Japanese toilet ghosts, with their thematic consistency of 'vengeful spirit who died an unjust death', may be more properly categorised as *yurei*. Translated as 'faint spirit', the *yurei* is for all intents and purposes a catch-all term for Japanese ghosts, under which various subcategories are clustered (Hanako and Kashima Reiko, for example, are *onryo*, or 'vengeful spirits', characterised by their desire to redress the wrongs visited upon them during life.) Contemporary scholar Komatsu Kazuhiko concludes that *yurei* should be considered a distinct entity under the broader auspices of *yokai*.[19] Indeed, *yurei* appear alongside their more monstrous contemporaries in the Edo-era *Bakemono no e*, a scroll displaying an enormous variety of *yokai*. Still other scholars consider ghosts an entirely separate category of being. It truly depends on who you ask.

Yokai or not, modern day toilet ghosts nonetheless occupy their own corner of the *kaidan* tradition. Author Toru Tsunemetsu collected these and other schoolyard urban legends in his *Gakko no Kaidan* ("spooky school stories") series of children's books, from which a popular Japanese horror film franchise was born.

And if classical toilet-based *yokai* were born of cautionary tales, warning the unwary of very real toilet-based hazards, we might consider these modern examples as an expression of a more intangible kind of anxiety and vulnerability. With their predisposition to school bathrooms – most often girls' bathrooms – and promise of abundant blood, there are echoes here of the liminality of adolescence, the fear of menstruation and the bodily changes it heralds, and the inherent vulnerability of private acts performed in semi-public.

There is also, as scholar Raechal Dumas notes,[20] the increasingly high-pressure spectre of contemporary academia to contend with; the 1970s were not only a boom period for horror stories, but a time of intense academic pressure for young Japanese people. The expansion of the education system and the advent of 'cram schools' marked an era of hyper-modern anxieties, compounding the existing fears of young people on the verge of adulthood. It seems fitting, then, that the school toilet – paradoxically both public and private, an in-between space with its associations of vulnerability and contamination, of isolation and anxiety and change – should be the central stage upon which Hanako-san and her brethren play out their eternal quest for justice.

LAURA MAURO is a three-time British Fantasy Award winning author of horror and weird fiction, and an enthusiastic amateur scholar of spooky Japanese folklore and fiction.

NOTES

1 Zack Davisson, *Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai: Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Creepy Creatures from Japan*, Tuttle Publishing, 2024, p.253.

2 Shinichiro Namiki, Katsumi Tada et al., *Discover Yokai: Japanese Yokai Encyclopaedia Vol.10*, Kodansha, 2008.

3 See https://matthewmeyer.net/blog/2010/10/27/a-yokai-a-day-hanako-san-or-hanako-of-the-toilet/

4 Davisson, *Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai*, p.146.

5 Hwang Dong-hyuk, director of Korean TV show *Squid Game*, recently confirmed that the show's use of red & blue tiles was a deliberate reference to Aka Manto; Dong-hyuk confirmed that the player's fate would remain the same no matter which colour was chosen (see: www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2021/10/19/squid-game-director-shuts-down-red-blue-player-guard-theory/?sh=589b163243d6)

6 See https://yokai.com/akamanto/

7 See www.atlasobscura.com/articles/japans-bathroom-ghosts

8 See https://toilet-magazine.jp/etc/1715 (in Japanese)

9 Reference to the *kawaya-no-kami* can be found as far back as early Japanese text Kojiki (712) (See https://uncannyjapan.com/podcast/toilet-gods/)

10 See https://hanasakasu.co.jp/articles/111 (in Japanese)

11 See www.japanstyle.info/12/entry12315.html

12 See https://japan.tsukuba.ac.jp/research_r/pdf/JIAJS9_ON6_SZCZYGIEL.pdf

13 Ed. Paul L Swanson, Susumu Shimazono et al., *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected Readings* Vol. 5 (Asian Humanities Press, 1993) p.193.

14 See www.kcpinternational.com/2018/02/horror-awaits-japanese-bathrooms/

15 See www.tofugu.com/japan/pokemon-yokai/

16 See https://yokai.com/kamikiri

17 See https://toilet-guru.com/japan/toilet-ghosts.html

18 Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japa*n, 2nd editon (Duke University Press, 1999), pp.90-91.

19 Komatsu Kazuhiko, *An Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, trans. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, 4th edition (Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2018), p.137.

20 Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.54.

BEYOND COTTINGLEY

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Other Fairy Photographs

The story of the Cottingley fairy photos hoax is well known, but the other fairy photographs collected by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle remain largely forgotten. ALAN MURDIE dusts off these fascinating images and asks whether their publication in 1928 ultimately did Doyle's Spiritualist crusade more harm than good...

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

The famous Cottingley fairy photographs rate as the greatest psychic photographic hoax of the 20th century. Branded "the first deepfake" by the History Channel,[1] they have fascinated audiences for generations. The photos were once cited to boost and buttress the case for belief in fairies,[2] or some other contentious phenomenon;[3] later, the young girls responsible for them, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, came to be haunted by their creations, with Elsie eventually confessing in 1983.[4] But the capacity of the pictures to inspire articles, analysis, sermons, polemics, moral lectures and quick and dramatic headlines remains undimmed. Attention to them is now probably greater than at any time since their original publication.

Books continue to appear on them,[5] while films, dramas, exhibitions and novels have been inspired by them.[6] Sceptics of all shades have raved and obsessed over them to the point of delirium for decades. Conjuror James Randi hated them, once even demanding the BBC put out a warning about them.[7]

Psychical researchers and parapsychologists have been whacked with them, despite having clocked them as fakes from the outset and never endorsing them.[8] Most fascinating is how they retain a power to evoke emotional reactions in audiences.

Once derided by sceptical scientists and photographic experts, their cultural importance is now reflected in no less an auspicious publication than the *Science Museum Journal* (Autumn 2024) carrying an article "The contested object biography of the Cottingley Fairy artefacts" by Christine Ferguson. She states: "I suggest how a new curatorial approach to the materials might reject the familiar – and largely inaccurate – narrative of deliberate hoax and deception still widely attached to the case and instead use them to tell a new story."[9]

And, of course, *Fortean Times* has covered the Cottingley photos on numerous occasions (see **FT53:48-53, 356:30-35, 379:58-59, 410:14-15**).

FAIRIES PHOTOGRAPHED
AN EPOCH-MAKING EVENT DESCRIBED BY
A. CONAN DOYLE
1728–1920
Old Friends Indeed!
FRY'S
Chocolates
and
Cocoa
THE STRAND MAGAZINE
SERIAL BY
ETHEL M. DELL
Stories by
W.W. JACOBS
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM
"SAPPER"
P.G. WODEHOUSE
F. BRITTEN AUSTIN
&c.
1/6 NET

LEFT: "Fairies Photographed" in the Christmas 1920 edition of *The Strand Magazine*. **FACING PAGE:** William Marriott's 1921 fake psychic photo showing Doyle with a ring of dancing fairies.

THE CAPACITY OF THE PICTURES TO INSPIRE DRAMATIC HEADLINES REMAINS UNDIMMED

FURTHER FAIRIES

So, at this juncture, it is perhaps the time to point out that the celebrated Cottingley pictures are not quite as unique as often thought. For it is the case that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who promoted them, actually collected further examples of alleged fairy photographs from England, Canada and Germany. These have hitherto gone largely unremarked and unnoticed since Doyle published them in 1928.

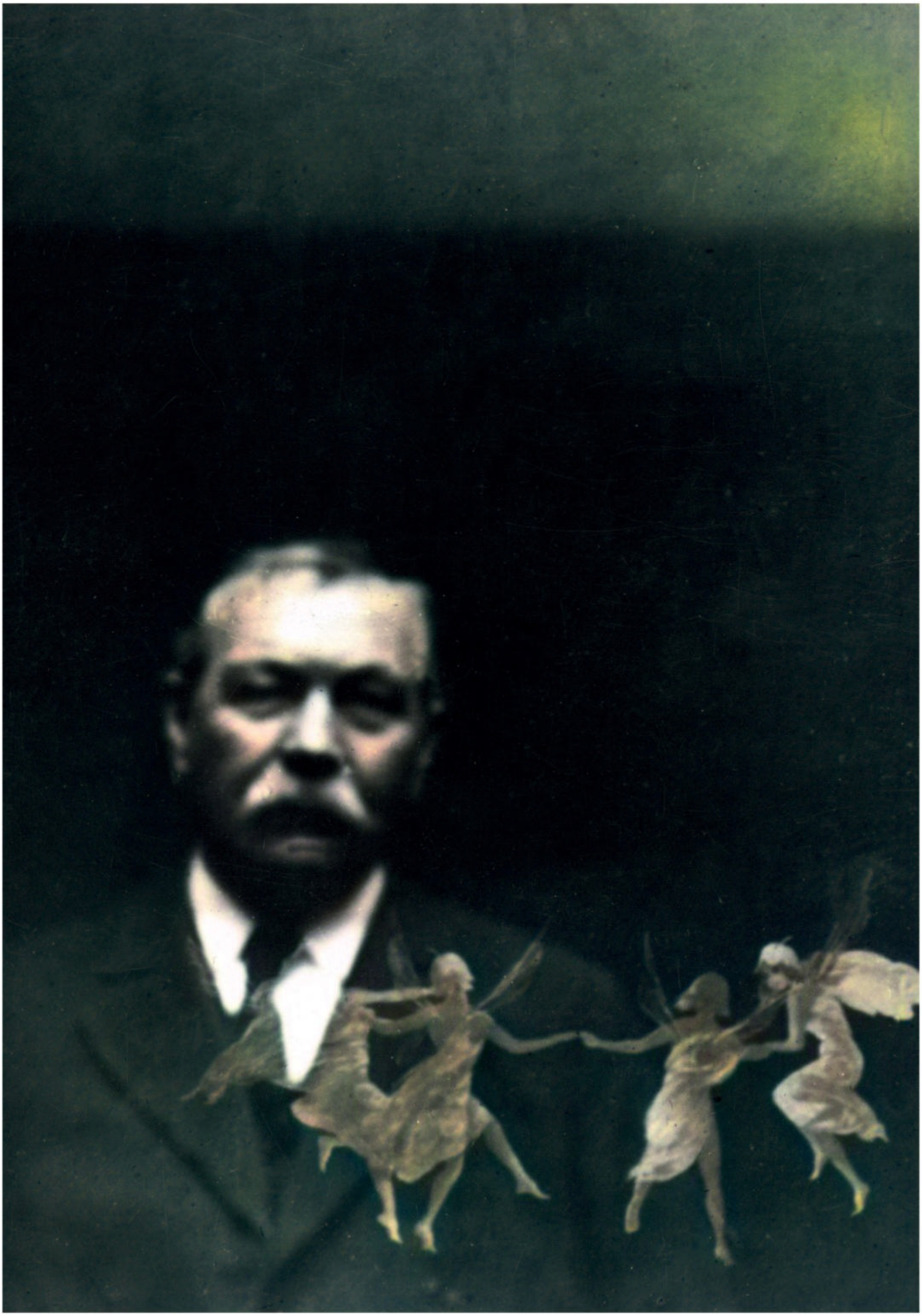
As is well known, the Cottingley furore started with the appearance of two of the original photographs in the 1920 Christmas edition of *The Strand Magazine* accompanied by an article by Doyle entitled "An Epoch-Making Event – Fairies Photographed". All copies immediately sold out, with the further three photographs appearing in the March 1921 issue.

Doyle had originally learned of the controversial photographs from Edward Gardner, a Bradford Spiritualist and Theosophist, with details reaching him just as he was contemplating writing on fairies. This seemed more than coincidence. At this time Doyle was fully engaged in championing Spiritualism, sharing its effects on his moral outlook and revealing his certainty of life after death.

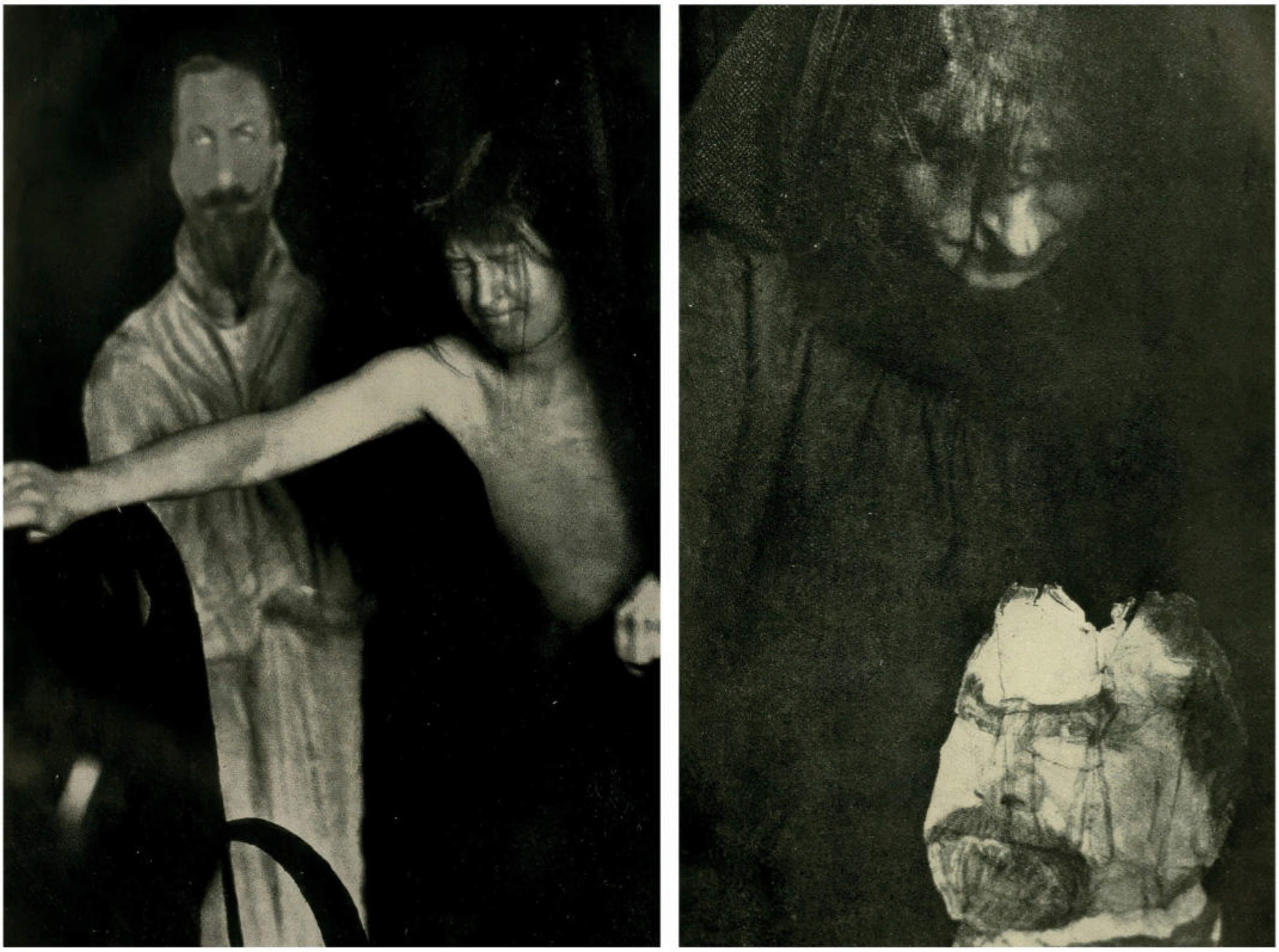
The fairy photographs opened up a whole new vista, with Doyle writing: "The recognition of their existence will jolt the material 20th century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud and will make it admit that there is a glamour and a mystery to life."

Inevitably many scoffed, jeered and even questioned his sanity. Doyle undoubtedly escaped the worst of the furore by being off on his Spiritualist campaign in Australia at the time of publication, later merely noting "the considerable interest" evoked and how "The old cry of 'Fake' was less conspicuous than I expected". Doyle attributed this to the press widening its appreciation of psychic matters.[10] However, just how much fairies were present in his mind at the time was illustrated in his taking the opportunity to enquire about them with a naturalist named TP Bellchambers, who dwelt in the Outback, regarding personal encounters and asking if indigenous fairies were black.[11]

The Cottingley pictures appeared at a time Spiritualist photography and attempts to capture materialisations of what believ-



CHROMA COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



ABOVE LEFT & RIGHT: The medium Marthe Beraud ('Eva C') produces some unconvincing spirit figures in Baron Schenck-Notzing's *Phenomena of Materialisation*; Beraud's breasts have been tactfully erased. **BELOW:** Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with a spirit in a photograph taken by Ada Deane in 1922.

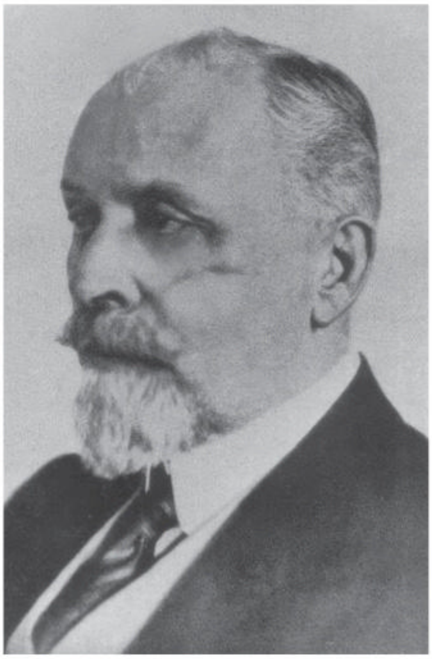
ers credited as ectoplasmic forms – spirits encasing themselves in a semi-fluid material exuded by mediums – were reaching a crunch point. Numerous alleged spirit pictures were in circulation, and in 1919 the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures was founded to specifically study them. The year 1920 saw the English translation of *Phenomena of Materialisation*, a book by the German researcher Baron Schrenck-Notzing (see **FT375:38-39**), illustrated with pictures of materialised psychic limbs and ludicrous-looking spirit figures mashed up from newspaper photographs. These emerged in sittings with a young medium Marthe Beraud ('Eva C') who had a predilection for séances where she was semi-naked (the pictures were doctored to erase her nipples; see **FT350:17**). Simultaneously, Doyle was also engaged in defending a spirit photographer named William Hope (see **FT375:34-40**) whom he backed despite mounting evidence of fraud, until confessions by collaborators put Hope's guilt beyond argument.

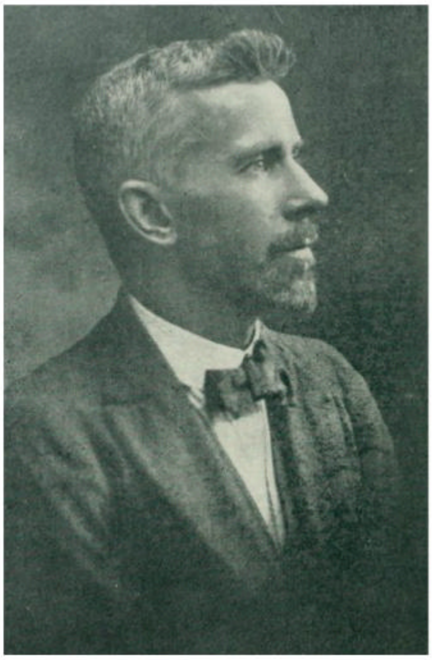
Thus, when Doyle conceded in *The Coming of the Fairies*, "I do not myself contend that the proof is as overwhelming as in the case of Spiritualistic phenomena," this was not saying much. Indeed, some of the very audience of believers whom Doyle might have hoped would be sympathetic to fairies expressed their reservations.

For instance, in the journal *Light* Mrs Philip CH De Crespigny, President of the Marylebone Spiritualist Association, immediately responded to *The Strand* article asking, "Has any clairvoyant seen and recorded any instance of a sight of Father Christmas?" and adding, "If there be any authenticated case of the sort it might help to a conclusion as to what the 'fairies' lately photographed really are…" She headed her comments, rather mockingly, "Father Christmas and the Fairies".

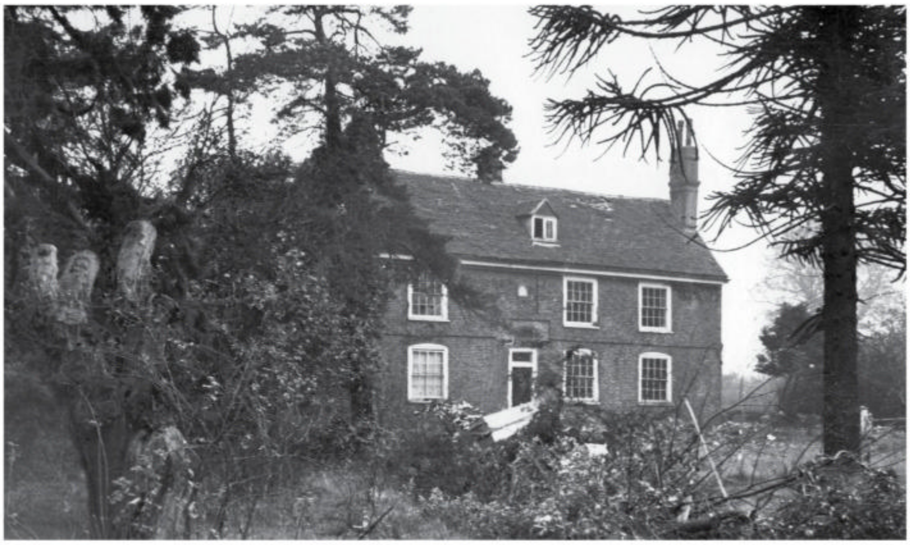
She opined: *"If a photograph of the snow-headed, benevolent old man laden with Christmas presents and making his entry down the chimney – who is obviously born only of children's brains – should ever be obtained, it would be evidence favourable to the thought-form theory in explanation of the fairies, but if Father Christmas, that most lucid and persistent of visualisations in all countries, remains invisible to the camera, it would argue, at all events negatively, that the fairies are not altogether of the stuff of which dreams are made."*[12] Effectively rejecting fairies as independent entities, she suggested that – at most – they were a projection from the

"HAS ANY CLAIRVOYANT SEEN AND RECORDED ANY INSTANCE OF A SIGHT OF FATHER CHRISTMAS?"





ABOVE LEFT: German psychical researcher Baron Schrenck-Notzing. **ABOVE CENTRE:** Bradford Spiritualist L Edward Gardner. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Mrs Philip CH De Crespigny suggested the Cottingley photos represented a projection from the girls' minds. **BELOW:** A photo of Downe Court Manor supposedly capturing six spirit faces.



minds of the girls.

A far weightier critic was physicist and psychical researcher Sir Oliver Lodge, author of *The Survival of Man* (1908). Despite having come to believe in spirits, Lodge declined to accept the Cottingley photographs as genuine, despite Doyle's best efforts to convince him at a cosy Establishment sit-down together at a gentleman's club in Pall Mall. Lodge maintained: "Without accusing anyone of fraud, the simplest hypothesis seems to be that an imaginative girl, playing and pretending, could innocently second the fantasy of her friends by making figures created by her, if she had the ability, and those figures were perhaps later photographed."

Despite such negative reactions Doyle continued to sanction the Cottingley photographs as genuine,[13] leading to the expansion of *The Strand* article into a book-length treatment, *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). His faith in the girls was shored up by support from clairvoyants attached to the mystical Theosophy movement, the photographs having first come to light at a meeting held in Bradford.[14]

FAIRY WITNESSES

Fortunately, a further vindication of the Cottingley visions came in the arrival of a considerable number of letters from people claiming to have spontaneously seen fairies. After citing the vintage testimony of the Revd Sabine Baring Gould (1834-1924) that as a small child in 1838 he had witnessed a crowd of fairies, Doyle revealed there were also more recent witnesses.

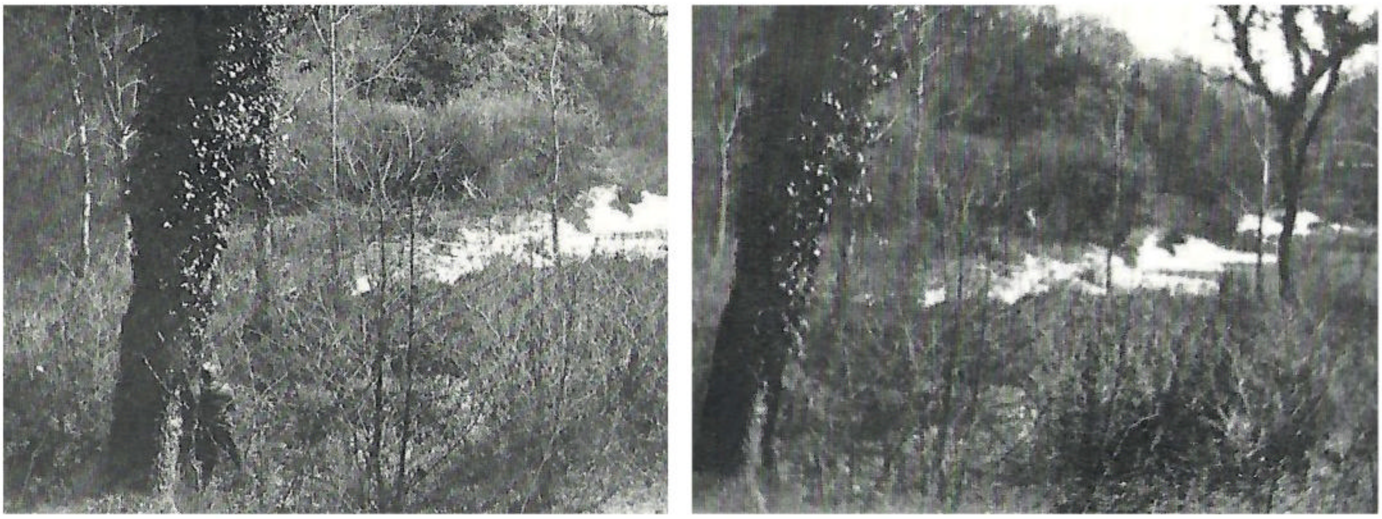
Most encouragingly, a handful of correspondents submitted their own photographs as possible proof. For Doyle, people seeing fairies translated automatically into his conviction that it was possible to photograph them, with the best pictures reproduced in the appendix of the little-studied second edition of *The Coming of the Fairies* in 1928.

Exactly how many pictures were received is unknown, but like the Cottingley pictures the images were supposedly captured in or around woodland, providing plenty of complexity in terms of light and shade. Several seem to be simulacra or pareidolia, the resemblance a construction of the mind's eye of the viewer.

One photograph featured two pictures of the same scene taken almost simultaneously by two men while cycling through Devon. Halting by the wayside in order to take a snapshot of a pretty grove that attracted their attention, they made two Kodak exposures from practically the same point of view, with just a few seconds' interval between each.

In the first of the photographs, a small creature is apparently leaning against the trunk of a tree, its back to the observer. It would seem the click of the camera shutter was enough to cause him to disappear, for in the second photograph, reportedly taken immediately after, no trace is visible. Neither man saw anything unusual at the time. Had both captured the same image from different angles they might have been stronger evidentially.

A young lady from Montreal ("the daughter of one of the leading citizens") submitted a picture of what she took to be a gnome in a cap taken with a 2A Brownie camera at Waterville, New Hampshire. It shows a vague shape reminiscent of Enid Blyton's character 'Noddy' (created in 1949) and possibly a second more insubstantial form materialising to its right in undergrowth. Simulacra or pareidolia seem most likely. I was reminded of a ghost photograph appearing in Anthony Hippisley Coxe's *Haunted Britain* (1973) of the grounds of Downe Court Manor, Kent, supposedly capturing half a dozen faces, a cavalier, a black man in a tricorn hat, a 'Miss Smith' and Charles Darwin! Looking at it I can discern three mysterious blobs in a tree and a shape



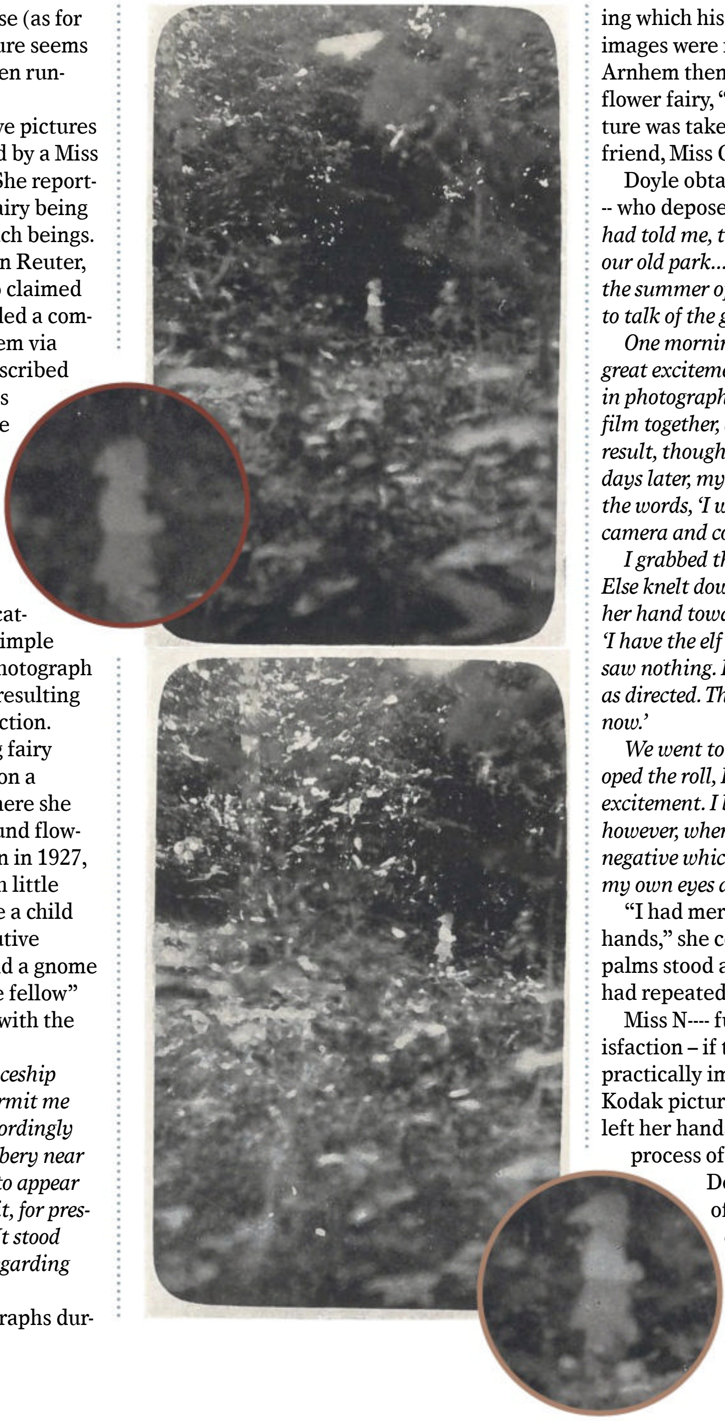
ABOVE: A pair of photos taken almost simultaneously by two men cycling through Devon; the small figure seen in the first photo has disappeared in the second one. **BELOW:** Two of Else Arnhem's photos (with inset enlargements) of the 'gnome', showing a change in the position of the"squat little fellow".

like a braided ponytail, but otherwise (as for most viewers, I suspect) all the picture seems to show is a rather dilapidated garden running wild.[15]

By far the most visually impressive pictures offered by Doyle were a set supplied by a Miss Else Arnhem, a German fairy seer. She reported three sets of encounters with a fairy being and obtained photographs of two such beings. These reached Doyle via Florizel von Reuter, a gifted Swiss German violinist who claimed mediumistic powers and who provided a commentary, explaining he obtained them via an intermediary, Dr Fritz Quade, described as a Berlin chemist. On request, Miss Arnhem went on to willingly provide a statement. According to this, her experiences began in December 1925 upon seeing a small man about three feet tall with a peaked cap appearing in her bedroom. The little man returned and, nicknaming him 'Troll', she began communicating with him by sign language and simple drawings. However, an attempt to photograph him with a flash only alarmed him, resulting in a silhouette unworthy of reproduction.

More success with photographing fairy beings came when she went to stay on a wooded estate in Prussia in 1926 where she began seeing small apparitions around flowers in the meadows. Returning again in 1927, she enjoyed further encounters with little figures including a radiant form like a child (like 'Troll' it did not speak), diminutive flower fairies the size of a thumb and a gnome described by Doyle as "a squat little fellow" about a foot tall. Friendly relations with the gnome ensued.

"After several days our acquaintanceship had advanced so far that he would permit me to approach quite near to him… I accordingly placed the camera amongst the shrubbery near the place where the gnome was wont to appear and waited. I did not have long to wait, for presently the little figure became visible. It stood in profile and seemed to be intently regarding something invisible to me."



She quickly managed two photographs during which his position changed. The resultant images were reproduced in the book. Miss Arnhem then succeeded in photographing a flower fairy, "like a large butterfly"; the picture was taken as it landed on her hand by a friend, Miss Getrude N-----.

Doyle obtained a statement from Miss N----- who deposed: *"My friend, Miss Else Arnhem, had told me, that she had seen Nature spirits in our old park… I remained very sceptical. During the summer of 1927 my friend Else began again to talk of the gnomes and fairies she had seen….*

One morning Miss Arnhem came to me in great excitement, saying she had succeeded in photographing a gnome. We developed the film together, and I was much astonished at the result, though by no means convinced… Several days later, my friend came running to me with the words, 'I want a witness. Please take the camera and come with me to the fairy meadow.'

I grabbed the Kodak and followed my friend… Else knelt down in the tall grass, stretched out her hand towards a flower, then said presently: 'I have the elf on my hand, do you see it ?' I saw nothing. Else then said, 'Snap now.' I did as directed. Then Else said, 'He has flown away now.'

We went to the house and immediately developed the roll, I secretly amused at my friend's excitement. I became dumb with astonishment, however, when something began to show on the negative which had certainly not been visible to my own eyes at the time I took the picture."

"I had merely photographed my friend's hands," she continues, "yet upon one of her palms stood a tiny elf-like shape such as she had repeatedly described to me."

Miss N---- further remarked to Doyle's satisfaction – if that of no-one else – that it was practically impossible to prepare or fake a Kodak picture, confirmed the camera had not left her hands or been with anyone else in the process of development.

Doyle declared: "The statement of the lady with her friend's corroboration and the further assurance as to character from a well-known German authority upon psychic matters make,

LEFT: The photo from Montreal showing a diminutive figure in a 'Noddy' cap; arguably a contender for FT's 'Simulacra Corner'. **BELOW:** Major Hall-Edwards, a pioneer of X-rays and something of an authority on photographic techniques, believed the Cottingley photos to be fakes.

HE CONCEIVED THE SECOND EDITION AS A VEHICLE FOR FORCING A REMATCH WITH HIS CRITICS

in my opinion, a very strong case, which becomes stronger yet when supported by the Cottingley results."

One interesting detail referred to by the women was that their dogs seemed to see these beings ahead of humans, and "would stop and bark at the place where the gnome was wont to appear", implying their fairies enjoyed an independent spectral existence.

However, in developing her own pictures and from her wider remarks, Miss N---- clearly knew something about photography. This leads one to wonder if the two ladies were simply the grown-up equivalent of Elsie and Frances playing at photographing fairies in the woods. One may also wonder about their intermediary, Dr Quade, who, we may note, was described as "a chemist".

FAKES AND FOES

Doyle was convinced these photographs acted as a further authentication of the Cottingley pictures, about which he asserted: "Nothing has occurred from that time onwards to shake the validity of the photographs."

Regarding the failure of Elsie and Frances to produce any further specimens, he excused them saying "the chief impediment… was the change in the girls, one through womanhood and the other through board-school education," though asserting they retained clairvoyant faculties.

Fakery he remained convinced was ruled out by their young age, coupled with his condescending declaration that girls of the 'artisan class' would be incapable of accomplishing such a complex fraud.[16] History has concluded otherwise.[17]

Unfortunately, the second collection of photographs failed to convince either Spiritualists or researchers who continued raising objections. For instance, how did one reconcile the problem of fairies being visible by clairvoyant sight to one person and yet invisible to another, while simultaneously capable of making impressions upon the commonplace chemicals used with film? (This is a question which has never been satisfactorily answered with alleged spirit photographs in general).

The second set of pictures also undermined the general consensus that spirits only materialise for mediums in the darkened conditions of the séance room, ectoplasm being deemed volatile and liable to react adversely to light. In contrast, these alleged fairy pictures were relentlessly sunlit.

Had Spiritualists backed Doyle he would have cited their opinions. For believers seeking meaningful contact with deceased loved ones, fairy photographs supplied no affirmation of any personal *human* survival.

DR. HALL EDWARDS
125·12

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

At best the wider movement sat on the fence, remaining largely unimpressed.

Otherwise, the weakness of his case was further shown by having to once again fall back upon his alliance with Theosophists for support. As it happened, on his Australian tour Doyle had encountered Bishop Leadbeater of the Theosophy Society and the Liberal Catholic Church, who gave further encouragement and endorsement. Doyle duly collected up the unchallenged assertions of a clairvoyant, a 'Mr Seargant' (actually another theosophist, Geoffrey Hodson), who visited Cottingley and claimed to see fairies in abundance, not just those perceived by the girls, but many more, helpfully supplying Doyle with a taxonomy, variously identifying them as water nymphs, wood elves, fairies, elves, gnomes and a brownie.

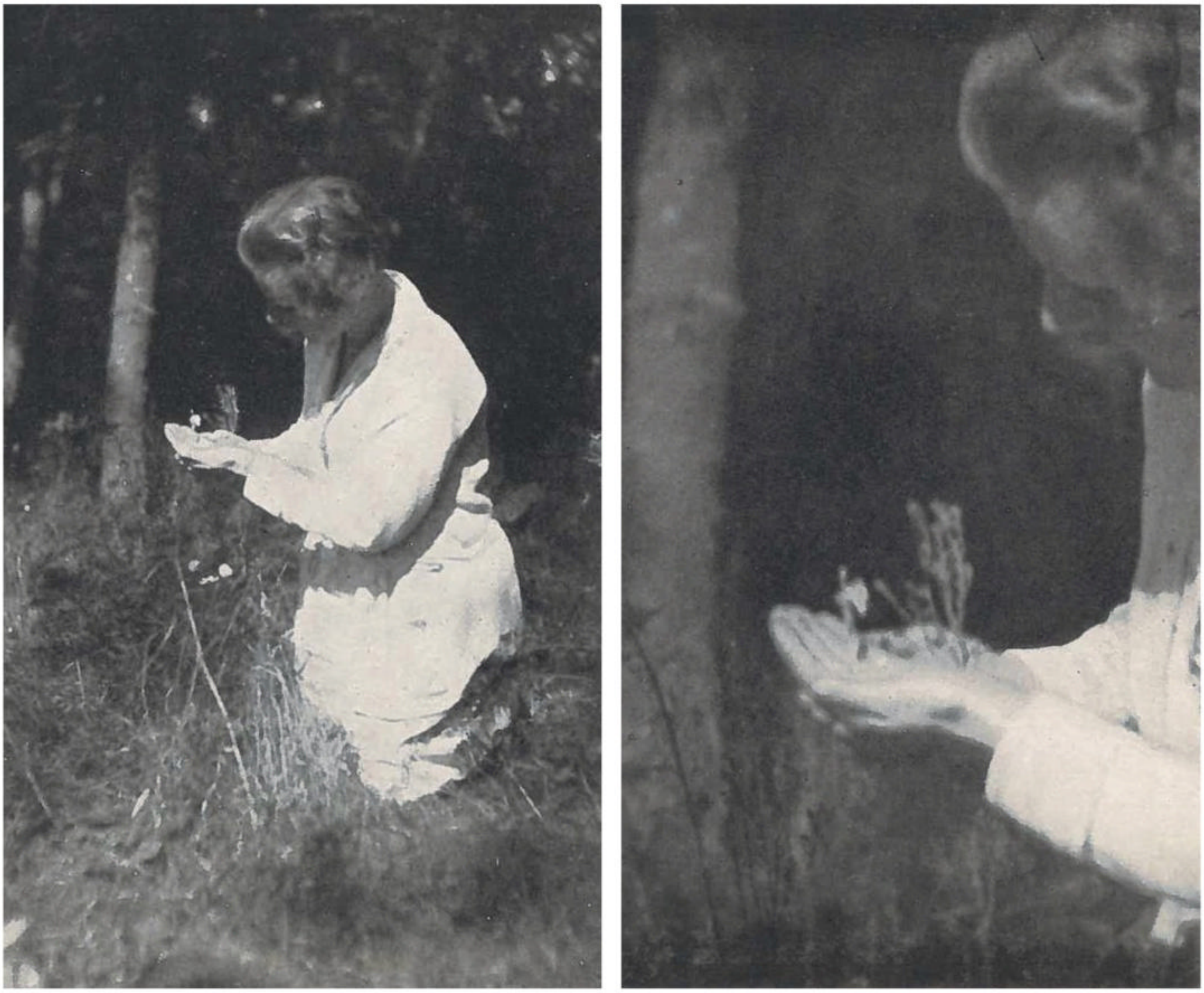
The only thing one may say with certainty about Hodson was that he was consistent. Thirty years later and resident in New Zealand, he produced a detailed guide to spiritual deities and powers in the Universe, years ahead of popular works like Nancy Arrowsmith's *A Field Guide to the Little People* (1977) or the more scholarly work of folklorists such as Katherine Briggs.[18]

Altogether, Doyle's second edition of *The Coming of the Fairies* with these fresh pictures was too little, too late. It was apparent to even the most generous observers that the new photographs offered were greatly inferior to the Cottingley pictures, lacking their clarity and charm and mediocre and uninspiring in comparison, though reportedly South African audiences responded largely positively to seeing the Devon and German pictures on Doyle's Spiritualist tour in the country in 1928.[19]

Rather like photographs of the Loch Ness Monster a few years later, it seems the best and most iconic fairy pictures were obtained at the beginning of a flap with everything declining thereafter (a mantra later echoed in psychical research).

Beyond this, it seems that Doyle also conceived the second edition of *The Coming of the Fairies* as a vehicle for forcing a rematch with his critics. Taking a step back, the second edition rather stands out as a monument to a dented ego. It illustrates how one should never underestimate how the urge to retaliate may grip even the most brilliant writers and artists whenever criticism has struck at entrenched personal convictions and deeply held beliefs.

Doyle particularly sought to re-open his clash with a Major Hall-Edwards, who questioned the bona fides of the idealised girls and suspected blatant fakery with the pictures. Finding no evidence of motion in the figures,[20] Hall-Edwards declared the photos might be faked in several ways, either with cardboard props, engaging in a double expo-



ABOVE: Else Arnhem with the a flower fairy, "like a large butterfly", that landed on her hand. The picture was taken by Miss Arnhem's friend, Miss Getrude N—, who saw nothing unusual at the moment she took the photograph and became "dumb with astonishment" when the film was developed.

sure with cut-out figures or by re-photographing a prepared photo using "figures of fairies cut out from some publication".

Doyle's grievances were doubtless also aggravated by a blazing demonstration of how fakery could be accomplished back in December 1921 after a photographer named William Marriott produced a fake psychic photo under test conditions using Doyle as the subject. The manufactured image showed Doyle with a ring of dancing fairies. Marriot's obvious intention was to slay the follies of spirit photography and the Cottingley images in one strike using a double exposure technique adroitly concealed.[21] The ruse was spotted almost immediately by Fred Barlow, the Secretary of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures, identifying the cavorting "fairies" as taken from a well-known advertisement – "Price's Night Lights" – a discovery for which at least one newspaper then unjustly attempted to take credit itself.[22]

As it was, by the second edition the tide was turning rapidly against spirit photography, with devastating exposures arising from more stringent testing utilising cine film, infra-red and X-rays.

BY THE SECOND EDITION THE TIDE WAS TURNING RAPIDLY AGAINST SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY

In the United States scientific researchers were quitting the séance room altogether following the bizarre circus and sexualised performances that had sprung up around the notorious Boston medium Mina Crandon, known as 'Margery', who was photographed with an ectoplasmic hand supposedly issuing from her vagina (see **FT300:50-54, 363:31-32**; a biochemical analysis of a sample suggested it was actually tissue from a sheep). Against such garish displays Doyle's ambiguous images snapped occasionally in country meadows and forest glades could scarcely compete for attention or sensation.

THE POWER OF IMAGES

Not that Spiritualism was uniquely naïve or mendacious in entertaining fraudulent pictures at the time; conventional psychology could also be guilty on occasion of data manipulation, including the retouching of photographs of human subjects when debates over the inheritance of intelligence were on the agenda. This occurred notably with photographs published in 1912 of a family called Kallikak who were held up by hereditarian psychologist Henry Goddard (1866-1957) as examples of the inheritance of feeble mindedness. Like Cottingley, the images and the extent of their manipulation were still being debated by evolutionists and psychologists into the late 1980s.[23]

That such images were given any credence at all reflects their foisting upon a far less visually sophisticated audience than one would find today. Fewer photographic images were in circulation, and casual viewers of the time would not have nearly the comparative ability possessed by even pre-teenage children now. Within a couple of decades most people recognised the anomalies in the shading and contrast of the humans and the fairies, with the girls rather obviously posing in the pictures.

What we should avoid thinking is that we are any way superior in a world awash today with propaganda, deepfakes and doctored

MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: The Cottingley fairy photographes continue to capture the popular imagination. *Photographing Fairies* was one of two 1997 films inspired by the case.

imagery; if anything, the risk of ensnarement is far greater, especially whenever images connect and resonate with strong opinions or feelings on any topic. We need only remember the regular crop of ambiguous, optimistic and dodgy ghost photographs excitedly shared across the Internet and the press today.

Much empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests our reception and interpretation of images is filtered and biased by our pre-existing attitudes, desires and prejudices. For some comfortable audiences, they reflect an idealised view of early 20th century English childhood, images of an Arcadian world long past but still capable of resonating with infantile fantasies, even into adulthood, especially in today's world where unhappy and lonely children and teenagers are sadly not uncommon. Ultimately their popularity ties up with the mysteries of perception itself.

In an article in *Psypioneer* bulletin in 2008, Leslie Price referred to "the Cottingley fairy photos which for long exercised a baleful influence over the study of fairy lore".[24] However, I would disagree that this was the main fallout from the original hoax.

Though derided, the long-term legacy of fairy photographs of the 1920s was to render the subject of fairies less of a taboo topic for serious discussion. Significantly, it slowly became more acceptable to admit to seeing a fairy being. 1927 saw the first formation of the Fairy Investigation Society (see **FT321:30-45**) and folklorists and anomaly researchers tentatively began gathering modern sightings. Some years later *Psychic News* noted with some satisfaction how in the early 1930s anthropologists were exploring such questions as, "Were fairies an earlier race of men?"[25]

Within a generation Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, after making an appeal for personal psychic experiences, reported he received six to eight times more sightings of fairies than of ghosts, leading him to dedicate his rather romantic work *The Ghost Book* (1955) to Marjorie Johnson of the revived Fairy Investigation Society.[26] It was a slow burn, far overtaken by ufology from the 1940s, but ultimately with flying saucers and grey aliens being interpreted by some as a modern manifestation of fairy lore.[27]

So, despite originating with hoaxing and wishful thinking, fairy photographs have eventually become a serious subject for academic research, educational initiatives and debates about anomalistic experiences. So perhaps, as the old doggerel, has it:

'Out of evil, cometh good
So don't do everything you should'.

ALAN MURDIE is a lawyer and writer with a longstanding interest in fortean phenomena. A former president of the Ghost Club, he compiles FT's monthly Ghostwatch column.

NOTES

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2 For example, Geoffrey Hodson, *The Kingdom of the Gods*; Theosophical Publishing House, India, 1952.

3 John Keel, *Operation Trojan Horse*, 1970 (correcting his error in the 1996 edition); Leo Talmonti, *Forbidden Universe: Mysteries of the Psychic World*, 1974.

4 Joe Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, 1990, pp.121-129; *Times*, 9 April 1983; *Psychic News*, 9 April 1983; Janet Bord, "Cottingley Unmasked", FT53, 1984; R Varley, "The End of the Cottingley Fairies. Why it became Yorkshire's Biggest Hoax", *Northern Life* June/July 2008. The completeness of such confessions has been doubted by some, e.g Tony Ortzen in *Psychic News*, 2 April 1983.

5 L Edward Gardner, (1945) *Fairies: A Book of Real Fairies*, 1945; Mary Losure, *The Fairy Ring, or Elsie and Frances Fool the Word*, 2012; Joe Cooper, op. cit.; Simon Young, op. cit.

6 *FairyTale: A True Story* (1997); *Photographing Fairies* (1997), based on the 1995 novel of the same name by Steve Szilagyi.

7 "BBC refuse to transmit magician's 'fake' claim", *Psychic News*, 19 Aug 1978; In his book, *Flim-flam* (1982) the sceptical Randi makes 22 references to the Cottingley Fairies.

8 Oliver Lodge, *Journal of the SPR* vol. 20, Mar 1921, p.70.

9 Christine Ferguson, "Power at play in paranormal history", *Science Museum Group Journal*, Autumn 2024.

10 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Coming of the Fairies*, 1922, p.42.

11 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Wanderings Of A Spiritualist*, 1921, pp.67-69.

12 In *Light*, 25 Dec 1920.

13 Alex Owen, "Borderland Forms: Arthur Conan Doyle, Albion's Daughters and the Politics of the Cottingley Fairies", *History Workshop* No.38, 1994, pp.48-85.

14 Simon Young, "History of the Fairy Investigation Society" in *Folklore* vol. 124, 2013, pp.139-156.

15 Anthony Hippisley Coxe, *Haunted Britain*, 1972, p.79

16 His reasoning was similar with the founders of Spiritualism, considering the Fox sisters of Hydesville "as two simple cornfed girls" in his *A History of Spiritualism* vol.1, 1926.

17 Cooper, op. cit; though leaving questions about the wider experience of the girls open.

18 That Hodson may have possessed genuine psychic abilities is not discounted by all scholars; see Neil Rushton, "Seeing the Unseeable: The Role of Clairvoyance in the Cottingley *Story*", https://deadbutdreaming.wordpress.com/2024/10/12/seeing-the-unseeable-the-role-of-clairvoyance-in-the-cottingley-story/

19 Kelvin I Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, 1989, pp.217-218.

20 The girls answered this point by saying the fairies moved very slowly, like slow-motion in the cinema, which for Major Hall-Edwards confirmed they knew about photographic trickery.

21 Everard Fielding, "An experiment in faking spirit photographs", *Journal* of the SPR vol. 20, Feb 1922.

22 *Light*, 17 Dec 1921, 7 Jan 1922.

23 Stephen J Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 1981; John O'Brien, ed., "Visual indictment: a contextual analysis of the Kallikak family photographs", *Mental Retardation*, 2005, 43 (4)

24 *Psypioneer*, vol 5 no.4, May 2008, p.102.

25 "They jeered at Conan Doyle – Now Scientists Talk About Fairies", *Psychic News*, 10 Sept 1932.

26 *Psychic News*, 26 Nov 1955.

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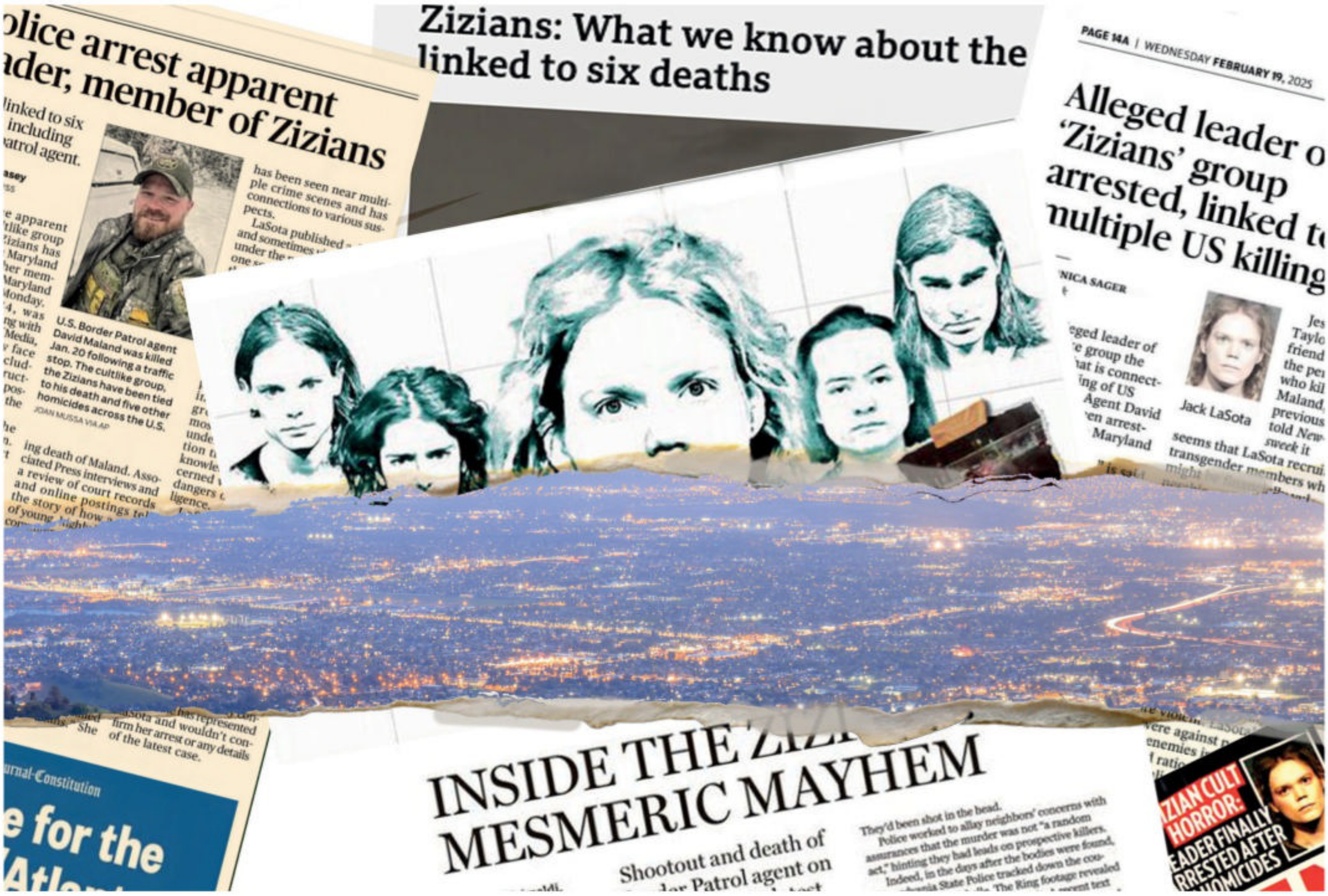
Thanks to Karen Patel, librarian at the Society for Psychical Research, for help with references.

THE ZIZIANS

HIGH STRANGENESS IN SILICON VALLEY

PART TWO: DIGITAL ESCHATOLOGY

NOEL ROONEY concludes his two-part look at the Zizians with a deep dive into the Silicon Valley Rationalist background from which Jack LaSota and his followers emerged, a heady brew of technological hubris, apocalyptic predictions concerning the growth of AI and some alarmingly mad, quasi-religious transhumanist ideas...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Zizians: What we know about the
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PAGE 14A | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2025
Alleged leader o
'Zizians' group
arrested, linked t
multiple US killing
Jack LaSota
INSIDE THE ZIZI
MESMERIC MAYHEM
Shootout and death of
ZIAN CULT
HORROR:
EADER FINALLY
RRESTED AFTER
OMICIDES

SILICON VALLEY PHOTO: YUVAL HELFMAN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

When I began to follow the story of the Zizians, I assumed I was looking at an extreme outlier, a violent aberration in a community of nerdy but ultimately rational people. As I tracked the group's history and started to understand the broader context in which it arose, I was astonished to discover that, far from being an outlier, the Zizians represented something approaching an exemplar. The extent of high strangeness in Silicon Valley, in particular among those dedicated to the project of AGI (artificial general intelligence), is both startling and ominous.

What I had innocently assumed to be an industry based on science and the pursuit of practical goals is, on closer inspection, a grand theological project driven by a quest for personal immortality, a belief that we (or at least some of us), with our intelligent machines, can 'save' the Universe, a vision of charity that prefers donating to causes millions of years in advance over helping people here and now, and a level of credulity that seems more suited to mediæval peasantry than tech geniuses.

ON CLOSER INSPECTION, IT'S A THEOLOGICAL PROJECT DRIVEN BY A QUEST FOR PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

It appears that the same people who are lauded as the cleverest in the world, destined to lead us to tech nirvana (or the Singularity), are peculiarly vulnerable to what one might term scripture (interminable slabs of text are standard in this worldview) produced by people who have a habit of morphing into something that looks for all the world like cult leaders.

Perhaps most sinister of all, the origins of the strange bundle of beliefs driving the various groups involved in this story lie principally in eugenics, a creed discredited numerous times that somehow manages to

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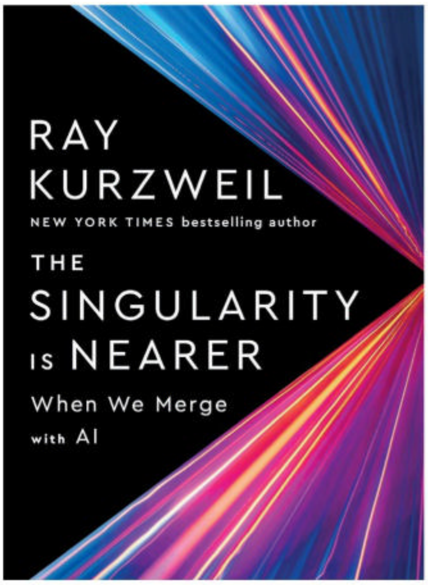
ABOVE: Computer scientist, futurologist and AI guru Ray Kurzweil photographed in 2011. Kurzweil has predicted that AI will achieve human-level intelligence by 2029 and that humans will merge with super-intelligent computers by 2045 in "the singularity".

resurrect itself regularly and infect new generations of the gullible. Along the way we will discover a world governed by IQ scores (a dangerously narrow determinant of a far broader range of skills and abilities) and led by people who feel entitled to live forever.

RATIONALISM AND THE IRRATIONAL

AI has a curious history. It was first proposed in the 1950s but by 1970 had largely been abandoned, on the not unreasonable grounds that it was both technically impossible and conceptually flawed. But it reappeared in the 1990s, driven in part by the writing of Ray Kurzweil, a coder, engineer and futurologist, and gained traction as the new century dawned. As digital technology cornered more and more of the market, a new confidence emerged in Silicon Valley; the people who led this monopolistic juggernaut believed, indeed knew, that they could do anything.

In an attempt, perhaps, to corral the unrestrained, hubristic enthusiasm of the new tech gods, some in the AI community started to philosophise; maybe they were hoping to add a conceptual framework that would bring order and rationality to the start-up Wild West. What persuaded them that skill at coding was a sound basis for ad-hoc theorising is anybody's guess. The fruit of this philosophical endeavour (or speculative spree) was Rationalism [see panel]. First espoused by Eliezer Yudkowsky, an IT prodigy turned prolix author of fan fiction, Rationalism quickly became the core catechism of the coders.



The Valley was awash with money. Investors chased anything that resembled an idea, desperate to be the one who made the big thing happen. Rationalism, and its burgeoning band of proponents, was treated like a nuts and bolts start-up. Well-funded organisations, such as CFAR (the Centre for Applied Rationality), MIRI (the Machine Intelligence Research Institute), Leverage and many others offered training in Rationalism to the tech community; and there were plenty of takers.

This is the world that Jack LaSota, AKA Ziz, entered in 2016. By then, some of the 'theorists' were indulging in practices that even for the Rationalists (at least the more rational among them) went beyond the pale. Working practices included sessions of psychobabble posing as professional development: mental audits and debugging. Heroic doses of psychotropic drugs were prescribed for aspirants, leading to psychotic episodes and, rumour has it, suicides.

And soon enough, as happens to all grand narrative theologies, schisms appeared, rending the fabric of Rationalism. The central issue that divided the community of the faithful was the Singularity, Kurzweil's notion that, at some point in time, computers would become so intelligent they would be capable of self-directed thought. Note that there is absolutely no scientific basis for this notion.

On the one hand, the utopians believed that we would be able to direct this 'evolution' so that computers would become an unstoppable force for good. On the other, the dystopians believed that computers would (perhaps rightly) come to see humanity as unintelligent and useless, and proceed to eliminate us. The battle lines were drawn around a dream that some saw as a nightmare.

One of the first schismatics was Michael Vassar. Vassar, a self-described futurologist, criticised the methods and goals of various Rationalist groups and recommended that people 'jailbreak' out of the strictures imposed on them and think for themselves. This struck a chord with a lot of people who were hurting from the trauma of debugging and psychosis.

Unfortunately, once people had signed up for Vassar's jailbreak, they discovered that he was advocating much the same process of painful mental gymnastics, prescribing the same massive doses of dangerous drugs, and exercising the same degree of control over his associates as all the other theorists. This triggered a further round of jailbreaks, this time to get away from Vassar. There is some evidence that Ziz was one of these people.

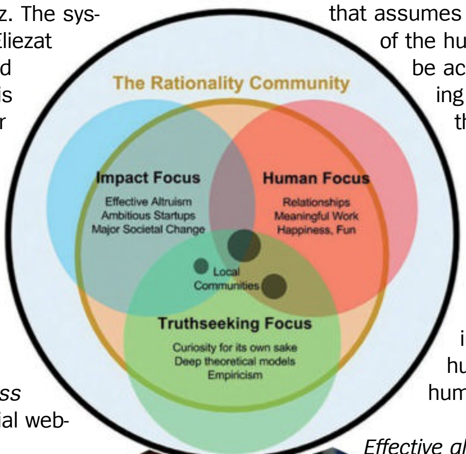
"DARK GODS WHISPER LIES OF LOGICAL ORDER"

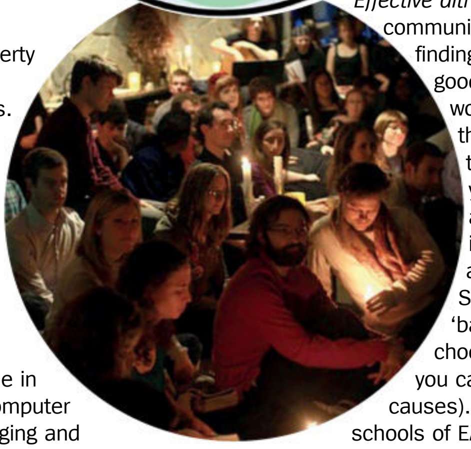
So wrote Ziz in the pamphlet she and her friends handed out during their infamous protest at a CFAR summer camp in 2019.

RATIONALIST PHILOSOPHY

A PRIMER

This is not the rationalism of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. The system described by Eliezat Yudkowsky (pictured below) and others is somewhat narrower in its focus and methods; it is in many respects a manual for radical self-improvement. The descriptions here are, in part, based on Yudkowsky's glossary of terms at *Less Wrong*, his influential website and blog.

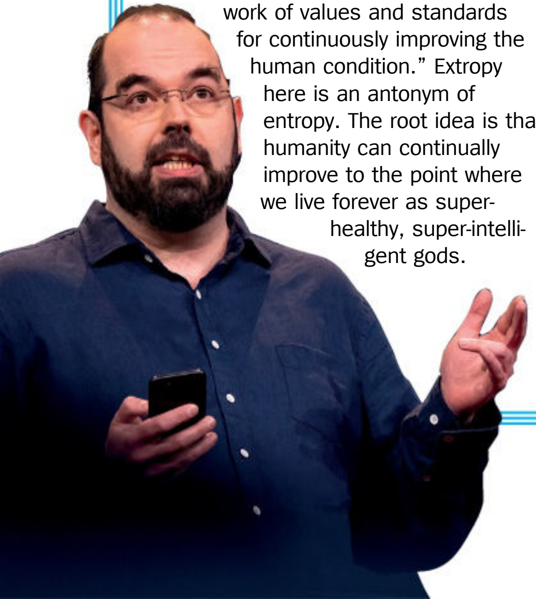




Rationality: the property of employing useful cognitive procedures. Making systematically good decisions (instrumental rationality) based on systematically accurate beliefs (epistemic rationality). The basic idea here is that mental processes are fixable in the same way as computer programs, by debugging and workarounds.

Decision theory: (a) The mathematical study of correct decision-making in general, abstracted from an agent's particular beliefs, goals, or capabilities. (b) A well-defined general-purpose procedure for arriving at decisions, e.g., causal decision theory. Effectively this is a manual for optimal decision-making in changing circumstances.

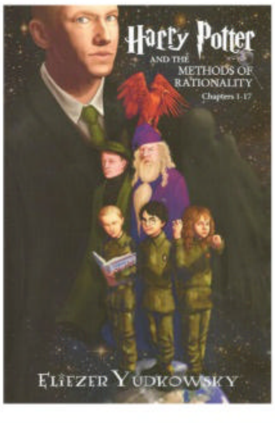
Extropianism: "an evolving framework of values and standards for continuously improving the human condition." Extropy here is an antonym of entropy. The root idea is that humanity can continually improve to the point where we live forever as super-healthy, super-intelligent gods.



Transhumanism: a system of thought that assumes the improvement of the human condition can be achieved by developing new technologies that can enhance longevity, cognition and well-being. The difference between transhumanism and extropianism is the essential involvement of non-human technology in human enhancement.

Effective altruism: "The EA community is focused on finding ways of doing good that actually work." In practice this means: getting rich makes you a better altruist; protecting ourselves against the Singularity (and all 'bad' technology); choosing battles you can win (no lost causes). Two competing schools of EA promote near-term vs long-term altruism; whether you put your money into contemporary problems or invest in future (often remote future) problems.

These are very brief sketches of extraordinarily complex (not to say confused) concepts. It is not by any means an exhaustive list. If you want to learn more, a good starting point would be Eliezer Yudkowsky's website, *Less Wrong*, which you can find at www.lesswrong.com/



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ABOVE: Futurologist and Rationalist schismatic Micahel Vassar.

When I first read this, I thought it bore an uncanny resemblance to the kind of sentence chatbots turn out while hallucinating. Or perhaps it was unconsciously inspired by Chomsky: colourless green ideas sleep furiously. It speaks of a mind struggling with ideas too big for it to handle. More ominously, it speaks of a rupture with those old gods, with the mainstream of Rationalist thought.

Who are the dark gods, and what lies do they whisper? If there is a pantheon of dark gods, it is presided over by the ghost of Alan Turing. Turing's famous, flawed thought experiment, the Turing machine, has effectively become the benchmark for devotees of AGI; that is to say, a machine capable of mimicking intelligent interaction may be said to be intelligent. Amazon named one of its AI toys the Mechanical Turk, after a famous hoax involving a chess playing automaton; perhaps this was irony, and perhaps such a knowing acknowledgement is a lesson for the wise.

The gods of eugenics loom large over Rationalism, in particular the theology of transhumanism. A number of scholars have identified eugenic motives and concerns in the core philosophy of transhumanism; it espouses the perfection of humanity (and thus by inference the elimination of imperfect humans) through the implantation of mechanical interfaces. The methodology sounds futuristic and neutral but it rests on beliefs which emerged in an era of imperialistic determinism that most of us would like to see consigned to history.

Ray Kurzweil is still a large presence in the cultural atmosphere of the Valley and he is still predicting the Singularity. Despite the fact that every single one of his predictions to date has failed to materialise, he is regularly lauded as the prophet of AGI and treated as a kind of digital Baba Vanga; infallible to the initiated, a magnet for gullible media, a giggling Isaiah to Yudkowsky's hand-wringing Jeremiah.

Yudkowsky is himself treated as occulted divinity in the Valley. His unceasing torrent of writing has shaped the views of many who see the Singularity as an existential

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threat. His influence on Rationalism has been profound and continues to be so. It may not be fair to lay the activities of such tragic fugitives as the Zizians directly at his feet, but his writing has clearly had a considerable bearing on the direction of thought that, eventually and tortuously, drove their bizarre trajectory.

It is tempting to suggest that Ziz is also one of the dark gods. Her writing is a textbook case of bizarre ideology masquerading as logic and it has radically changed the lives of those who heeded it. She is dystopian in terms of the Singularity – thus a schismatic – and heretical to the admonition to 'be kind' that is in theory fundamental to effective altruism. One might say that her work is a disruptive New Testament to Yudkowsky's Old.

So the dark gods are real and their verity is anything but assured. Ziz's peculiar statement has a germ of truth in it, albeit wrapped in a faux numen of her own devising. More importantly, the entire argument between the factions, the sects, of rationalist belief can be understood only in theological terms. We are left with the uncomfortable conclusion that Silicon Valley, home to the cutting edge of technology, developed by the most vaunted minds in modern society, is fatally pestered by spirits. How did we come to such a paradoxical juncture?

THE RAPTURE OF THE NERDS

The 'rapture of the nerds' is how sceptical folk in the Valley refer to the Singularity. It captures rather neatly the fundamental contradiction between the public image of the IT industry as science writ large and the reality of a community driven – and divided – by beliefs that most rational people would dismiss as eccentric at best.

It is regularly observed that the leading lights of the AI industry are largely neurodivergent. And that divergence is of a particular type. People who might once have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome; people with impressively high IQ scores, but some challenges in adapting to the wider world and its inconsistencies; these are the people driving the quest for AGI.

> PEOPLE WITH AUTISTIC TRAITS CAN BE VULNERABLE TO THE TYPE OF PERSUASION WE ASSOCIATE WITH CULTS

Psychologists have noted that people with autistic traits can be vulnerable to precisely the type of persuasion that we associate with religious sects and cults. They tend to take language (especially written language) literally. They sometimes rely on internal logic to the extent that they will defend an untenable position if it is arrived at, in their view, logically. They are, that is to say, a particular blend of tenacious and gullible; credulous savants, open to ideas (too open, in some respects), but subsequently inflexible in their attitudes and beliefs.

When someone inserts an idea on the scale of the Singularity into such a community, and it is delivered by an acknowledged hero of the industry, it is more or less guaranteed to invoke some strong reactions. Kurzweil's maven swagger, and the confidence with which he has talked up an event that is at best ontologically dubious, may on its own have been enough to kick-start the string of theological debates that has divided the church of the nerds, to the point where some felt that they had to take the law into their own hands.

Yudkowsky may have played a part, too, as the first philosopher of Rationalism. His voluminous scripture, his Harry Potter fan fiction, and his agonised acceptance of the idea of the Singularity, may all have created a forum where musings on the practical business of coding could morph into the dense, splintered nexus of beliefs that now infests Silicon Valley.

And perhaps it was California. Perhaps the state is now so contaminated with vestiges of the madness of its more infamous inhabitants that new, unwitting settlers brush up against the residue of it and become infected. Among these settlers are the people we identify as tech bros; the movers and shakers of the biggest industry on Earth. The tech bros all subscribe to Rationalism to some extent.

And all of this would be little more than a quaint rabbit hole in an exotic location except for one deeply salient point. The digital industry has achieved an unprecedented monopoly; to the extent that we are now moving towards putting all our societal eggs into a single technological basket. This would be risky with any technology. But to place our faith in a technology that some of its developers believe is an apocalyptic menace is surely not a comforting thought.

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The wolves of Skinwalker Ranch

As US scientists claim to have 'resurrected' the dire wolf, SD TUCKER asks if such experiments could cast new light on an old lupine mystery from Skinwalker Ranch?

COLOSSAL BIOSCIENCES

Although today most famous from its appearance in the fictional *Game of Thrones*, the dire wolf (*Aenocyon dirus*) is a real species, a larger than ordinary breed of wolf with a far greater bite-capacity in its teeth and jaw, which flourished across the Americas during the Pleistocene and Holocene epochs, 125,000-10,000 years ago. This means that, while now extinct, the animals' lifespan on this planet once crossed over with that of ancient humans.

Yet now dire wolves have suddenly returned to howl at the Moon anew. An American gene-fiddling company, Colossal Biosciences, has just used what its qualified sperm-handlers called "deft genetic engineering and ancient DNA" to breed three brand-new dire wolf cubs to "de-extinct" the species (see p.14). The trio, christened Romulus, Remus and Khaleesi (inconveniently, Romulus and Remus were not triplets themselves – shades of Peter Cook's old lament that "Tragically, I was an only twin") were injected into the womb of an ordinary domestic dog. Pleased with their results, the real-life *Jurassic Park* staff announced plans to resurrect those old fortean favourites the thylacine and the mastodon too. Other scientists call Colossal Biosciences a bunch of Colossal Liars, arguing the prehistoric DNA used to facilitate this miracle would by now have been far too degraded to breed full-blown dire wolves from. Critics say the geneticists would have been therefore obliged to fill in all the missing gaps in the foetuses' genomes with substitute gene-thingies from modern-day grey wolves, thereby making the consequent cubs little more than modified ordinary wolves with larger than normal jaws – a bit like eugenically breeding a new human baby to have a big chin and then claiming to have resurrected Bruce Forsyth.[1]

A dire wolf was purportedly shot on a ranch in Montana

Another criticism might be that the project is unnecessary in any case: because dire wolves, just like Tasmanian Tigers and the coelacanth, never truly went extinct at all. In 2018, one was purportedly shot on a ranch in Montana, after spooking cattle. The creature looked different from an ordinary wolf, being acclaimed as a chupacabras, a werewolf, a dogman, or a Bigfoot by various excited observers. Others thought it to be a living (until shot dead) example of a relict dire wolf. It certainly had unusual morphological aspects surrounding its snout, teeth, claws and ears, but subsequent DNA analysis conclusively proved it was simply an odd-looking, but ultimately normal, grey wolf. Certain people, like Marty Feldman or Joseph Merrick, may look rather strange and atypical too, but nobody would say they were not actually human. It was the same with the slain Montana wolf. It was just an ordinary animal, if a weird-looking one, not a prehistoric monster.[2]

On another American ranch, however, more sensational dire wolf sightings are today reported: of course, it's the infamous Skinwalker Ranch in Utah, alleged home of such High Strangeness phenomena as UFOs, interdimensional portals, earthlights, poltergeists, cryptids and cattle mutilations (see **FT169:44-47, 363:38-41, 398:21**). Sometime in the 1990s, the Ranch's former owners, the Sherman family, famously reported encountering a giant wolf, as tall as their car, chomping one of their cows – a bulletproof wolf which easily survived being shot with heavy-duty ammo several times at point-blank range without even bleeding, before calmly trotting away and vanishing into thin air, its footprints coming to an inexplicable full stop in the mud.[3] Today, the ranch is occupied by a team of scientists, their adventures detailed in an entertaining TV series, *The Curse of Skinwalker Ranch*. During the current series five, while examining a mutilated cow, investigators found its ribs pierced by huge puncture-wounds which, when matched up with various predator-teeth samples, Cinderella-style, matched up perfectly with those of a dire wolf. Plus, they then discovered a strange, canine-like skull on the ranch, only partly decomposed and therefore no fossil, which was identified by a specialist as having an abnormally large jaw also resembling that of a dire wolf. The team sent it off for DNA testing to await analysis, and then… nothing. So far, viewers don't yet know what it really was.[4]

Realistically, though, if it *was* a non-extinct dire wolf (or maybe a live prehistoric one that had been dropped through a time-tunnel, as allegedly also exist on the Ranch), you'd have thought audiences would have been told about it by now! Plus, no matter how fearsome dire wolves were, they were not as big as cars, bulletproof, or able to teleport, as the Shermans' own cryptid allegedly did. My own ill-informed bet is that the skull's DNA, once fully analysed, will prove to come from an ordinary modern-day wolf, like in Montana in 2018, albeit one with an anomalously huge jawbone. Until then, we'll just have to wait and see if the Skinwalker crew are telling the truth here, or merely crying wolf.

NOTES

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2 www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44243644; www.cbsnews.com/news/dna-test-reveals-identity-of-mysterious-wolf-creature-shot-in-montana/

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4 www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfHIZO7hs4k; www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-VQqwILkxo; www.25yearslatersite.com/2024/05/08/the-secret-of-skinwalker-ranch-dead-in-the-water-s5e3/; the show is called *The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch* in the US, but '*Curse*' in the UK

SD TUCKER is the author of numerous books on fortean subjects and a regular contributor to FT.

Ape Sandwich Story!

MATT SALUSBURY recounts the curious tale of how an American writer living in the Netherlands invented the Dutch urban legend or *broosjeaapverhaal*

HANS VAN DIJK FOR ANEFO / NATIONAL ARCHIVES

LEFT: A surprised-looking Ethel Portnoy photographed in 1979.

Ape Sandwich story! It sounds like another desperate idea for a TV series blurted out by Alan Partridge at a pitch meeting (fans may recall his "Monkey Tennis"), but in the Dutch language *broodjeaapverhaal* – literally an "ape sandwich story", is an urban legend. The saga of how our North Sea neighbours came to know urban legends and friend-of-a-friend stories as "ape sandwich stories" is itself a tale of almost fortean strangeness.

The book *Broodje aap: de folklore van de post-industriële samenleving* ("Ape Sandwich: the folklore of the post-industrial society") by Ethel Portnoy was published in Amsterdam in 1978. It was a bestseller: its first edition sold out in a couple of months and it went through eight editions within the next two years. There was even a now largely forgotten 1992 sequel, *Broodje aap met* ("Ape sandwich with extras").

Oddly, this Dutch bestseller was written by an American author, writing in English, not in Dutch. Philadelphia-born writer Ethel Portnoy met and married a Dutchman, Rudy Kousbroek, while studying anthropology and archæology in France, and settled in the Netherlands with him. She earned a living as a newspaper columnist for various Dutch-language newspapers and magazines. She felt herself to be a Dutch author, won a prize for (Dutch) feminist literature, and all 25 of her books published up to her death in 2004 were in Dutch.

A man gets lost in the sewers of Paris and all that is found is his shoes

But Ethel's husband translated her work from English into Dutch for publication, continuing to do so after their divorce in the 1980s, with Ethel's daughter Hepzibah and her colleague Tineke Davids also translating her work for her. Weirdly, the extracts from *Broodje aap* below are my translations back into English, there being no extant English version I could find. While *Broodje aap* and other anthologies by Portnoy are considered important enough to be in the British Library, its catalogues list no works by her written in English.

The post-industrial urban legends in *Broodje aap* are, in Portnoy's words, about "cars, motorways, motorbikes, shops, departments stores, cheques, pills, marijuana, central heating, pollution, industrial monopolies, funeral directors, customs officers, police officers, hitch hikers… In a sense, this book is not written by me but by everyone. I just wrote down what I heard." Portnoy compares her "incomplete and random" anthology of "ape sandwich stories" to the cabinets of "rarities" of the early 19th century.

Most of the "ape sandwich stories" in the collection are just a few sentences long. These are along the lines of "an English couple on holiday returning by car from Spain, their grandmother dies near the French border. To save time they stick her in the boot of the car and go for lunch, the car is stolen." Then there are tales of copper one cent coins completely dissolved by Coca Cola, or of a man getting lost in the sewers of Paris and all that is found of him is his shoes; he was eaten by the giant albino rats that live down there.

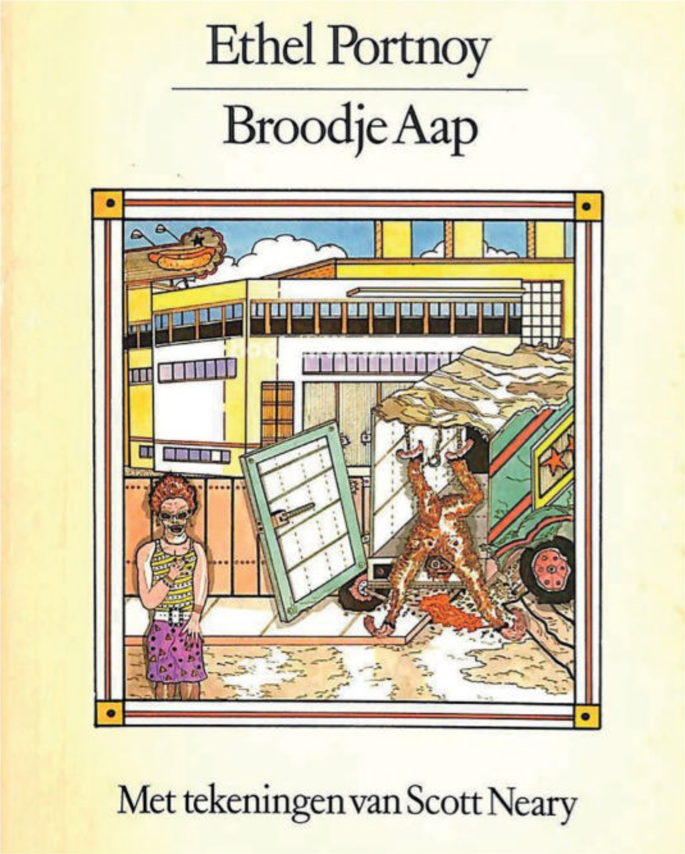
There is much grossness and biological implausibility – a woman gets "a million dollars" in compensation after becoming pregnant from staying at a hotel where they hadn't properly cleaned the bathtub into which the previous male guest had masturbated, and so on. When *Broodje aap* was written, "the Pill" had recently taken hold. Portnoy observes that "you could write a book on the myths of young girls on pregnancy and childbirth… or on the folklore of medical students, or that of soldiers." Bizarre infant mortality, body parts, bad sex, unlikely accidental beheadings and unwitting cannibalism and general grossness feature heavily, as do "hippies".

There are only two stories from the Netherlands in this Dutch-language anthology. In one of these, builders are laying paving stones in the streets of a Dutch town while a lady walking her yappy little dog stops in the street for a chat with a passing friend. When she finally moves on, her dog is missing. Dutch street pavers seem to have a legendary dislike of yappy little dogs; they had buried this one under their paving stones. In another tale, a young Dutch woman, who wants to emigrate to Australia, makes a deal with a couple of sailors in exchange for "services rendered" on the voyage. She is smuggled on board and kept below decks. Eventually she runs onto the deck and finds they've been repeatedly crossing the Ij Viaduct canal and have never left Amsterdam.

Several of *Broodje aap*'s "histories" include West Coast millionaire playboy and amateur chemist 'Owsley', "the most recent of a series of figures in the American regional mythology."[1] Owlsley sagas include him visiting "hippies" in prison, convincing the wardens he was there just to read to them from the Bible. This he does for a while, until the guards get distracted, then he rips out the pages and suggests to the prisoners that they taste them. The pages of the Bible are soaked in LSD! Other such sagas, with or without Owsley, feature "hippies" and police on drug busts being driven insane after accidentally taking LSD or marijuana or other unspecified "drugs" that all have vastly exaggerated, chemically impossible miraculous evil powers.

A legendary hook-handed "escaped lunatic", causing female students to lock themselves in their dorms for fear of being murdered, also gets a look-in. And scouts in the (unspecified) woods have to stick together and stay vigilant so that Cropsey the Maniac doesn't pick one of them off and roast them alive.

In Portnoy's late 1970s post-Nietzschean world, "God is dead


Ethel Portnoy
Broodje Aap
Met tekeningen van Scott Neary

broodje aap

LEFT: The first edition of *Broodje Aap* from 1978. **BELOW**: The popularity of 'ape sandwich stories' also inspired two Dutch TV shows called *Broodje Aap*: a panel show running from 1997-1998 and, from 2022, a series retelling "bizarre and sensational stories that have been going around the world for decades".

here, there are a couple of supernatural stories where a motorway replaces a haunted house as anxiety inducing decor… The absence of ghosts or spirits and such betrays a lack of belief or importance attached to the hereafter," the occasional phantom hitchhiker notwithstanding.

To be honest, the stories themselves seem to me somewhat lame – obviously impossible "man in the pub" tales with the same level of sophistication as said-to-be-true stories I myself heard from my contemporaries back in 1978 – when I was 14 years old. Some crude racism aside, these 1970s "ape sandwich stories" now seem charmingly innocent compared to some of the politically-motivated, bot-driven, social media-disseminated misinformation that rules the world today.

Among the longer entries, at just over half a page, is the eponymous story number 84, the original *broodjeaapverhaal*. In this, police in the backstreets of the Bronx get a call. A headless, skinned body is found in the street, the police pathology laboratory declares it to be not of a human, but of a gorilla. It turns out there was a collision between two trucks outside a hot dog factory and the carcass rolled out of the back of one of the vehicles. The police visit the hot dog factory nearby and find filleted and headless bodies of apes and bears, bought from a zoo. So it could just have easily have become a "bear sandwich story."

A *broodje* can be a sandwich, but also a roll, patty or bap, or any bread-based item that you can wrap around a filling – including ape hot dogs as in this improbable Bronx yarn. *Aap* can denote an ape or monkey, and the @ symbol in Dutch is called an *apenstaartje*, a monkey's tail. But given that they have more meat on them than monkeys, the primates in the original *broodjeaapverhaal* were probably supposed to be apes. Later analysts speculated that the story was spread by parents in the 1970s to discourage their children from constantly clamouring for yet another then-popular Happy Meal.

Portnoy's detailed endnotes on the sources for her "ape sandwich stories" and their numerous variants are longer than the tales themselves. The *broodje aap* story itself is identified as type 1286 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folk tale type index (www.artandpopularculture.com/Aarne–Thompson_classification_system), while Portnoy traces this particular yarn back to the Hunter's Point in the Bronx in the 1930s, noting that it was also in more recent circulation in the Netherlands since crossing the Atlantic in a cutting sent from New York to the Dutch *Telegraaf* newspaper. The endnotes also trace phantom hitchhiker stories to Korea, while a lot of the book's entries are revealed as very old stories that turn up in 1920s French anthologies, which Portnoy probably came across while studying anthropology there back in the 1950s.

How, then, did all urban legends become ape sandwich stories in Dutch? This seems partly due to the unsatisfactory translation of "urban legend" into "*stadssage*" ("city saga") or *stadslegende* ("city legend")", which doesn't adequately convey the same nuance as "urban". The Dutch adjective *stats* denotes "urban" but it's more neutral and functional than the English "urban", which conveys a grittier and more "street" feel, as in English phrases like "urban guerilla" to describe the Baader Meinhoff gang or *Brigado Rosso* terrorist cells, also from the 1970s. The somewhat tepid-sounding alternative Dutch phrase *moderne sage* ("modern saga") never really took off.

There was already another Dutch phrase to describe urban legends or friend-of-a-friend stories, but this was becoming problematic around the time *Broodje aap* appeared. Pulp novels about cowboys and Indians in the Western genre had long been popular in the Netherlands, particularly "romantic" stories featuring Native American characters, many of these written by German author Karl May. There was a brief immediately post-war renaissance in Western novels and subtitled Hollywood Western films. By the 1960s there was a critical backlash against the genre, and *Indianenverhaal* – a story about Indians – became a commonly-used phrase to describe a risibly implausible plot. By 1982, though, *Indianenverhaal* was seen as a derogatory, racist term, with a letter to the Communist newspaper *De Waarheid* that year criticising their use of the phrase as "racist" and "backward." Then up popped instant bestseller *Broodje app*, "ape sandwich story", with a phrase that did the same job better and sounded way cooler.

The Institute for the Dutch Language were picking up examples of the use of *broodjeaapverhaal* or just *broodje aap* for short, from around 1994 (https://anw.ivdnt.org/article/broodjeaapverhaal). Anthologies and databases of folktales were using *broodjeaapverhaal* in their titles by 2006, and by 2014 "ape sandwich story" was in common parlance in the Dutch-speaking Flanders region of Belgium as well as in the Netherlands, where Paul Burger became the first academic to get a PhD in "ape sandwich stories" in that year. By 2020, local news website *In De Buurt* could write about "ape sandwich stories" made up to explain how the statue of King Willem II came to be in the city of Tilburg, confident that everyone knew what they were talking about.

Do *FT* readers know of any other fortean phenomena that have unusual names and backstories to their names in other languages? Do tell, via the letters page.

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1 Presumably these were garbled tales concerning the very real Owsley Stanley (aka Bear), 'chemist' and sound engineer for the Grateful Dead – Ed.

MATT SALUSBURY is the author of *Mystery Animals of Suffolk* (https://bitternbooks.co.uk/product/mystery-animals-of-suffolk/) and a regular FT contributor.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

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The making of (human) monsters

Challenging definitions of humanity, the author argues for 'a future in which difference is celebrated rather than shunned, in which all of us, and thus none of us, are monsters'

Humans

A Monstrous History

Surekha Davies

University of California Press 2025
Hb, 322pp, £25, ISBN 9780520388093

"There are no monsters, but all of them are real," says Surekha Davies in the introduction to *Humans: A Monstrous History*.

If a monster is defined as something on the borders of humanity – whether a hybrid of human and animal, living and dead, man and machine or something else – then studying societies' beliefs in or stories about monsters can help reveal where societies believe the boundaries of humanity to be. By understanding monsters, we can understand more about humanity, and about the areas where definitions of humanity are challenged and contentious.

This is the approach Davies takes throughout *Humans* – looking at different ways in which modern and historical societies have viewed the ever-changing definition of humanity through its monstrous mirrors (the cover of the book features a mirrored finish with a frame of famous monsters, which is a nice touch).

Although monsters exist on the fringes of human society, Davies believes they are critical to the ways in which we understand ourselves. This idea has appeared in some previously-reviewed books, including Tim Flight's *Basilisks and Beowulf* (**FT425:55**), but Davies takes the concept beyond a single place or time period to look at a wide range of different cultures and the ways in which they engaged with the idea of humanity through monsters. It's a big topic, so she breaks it down into sections, organised thematically rather than by place or time.

These topics include humanity's relationship to its natural environment, the blurry boundaries between human and animal, the development of concepts of race and nationality (a topic so vast Davies breaks it up into two chapters), gender and reproduction, sideshows and other performances, the role of magic and the supernatural, and the relationship between humanity and technology.

The book concludes with a section on what Davies calls "monstrofuturism" – a new way of looking at the monstrous in all humanity.

This isn't just an historical work, either: the issues that Davies raises are very much alive in the 2020s. *Humans* takes in modern debates about the role of so-called AI, the ways in which human views of our ecosystem have contributed to climate change and wildlife extinction, and our changing understanding of topics like race and disability.

Particularly relevant – indeed, so relevant that the political situation has changed significantly between writing and publication – is the topic of gender, where Davies points out the ways in which deviations from society's gender norms have often been treated as monstrous or other, as well as the ways in which those norms are not as timeless or universal as politicians or the media argue.

Davies visits the freak show, but it's the audience and the proprietors she's interested in looking at

And, of course, although the ideas of races and nations as monstrous, threatening or inferior are hardly new, they continue to be dangerously relevant.

Although *Humans* is primarily a history of the idea of humanness, it is also a work of advocacy, in which Davies argues for, in the words of her conclusion, "a future in which difference is celebrated rather than shunned", in which all of us, and thus none of us, are monsters.

Humans draws its examples from throughout history, from ancient Greece to the Portuguese empire to the Marvel comics of the 1960s to pre-colonial Mexico. This variety of sources is one of the things that makes it so compelling, but it can sometimes feel like a limitation, as though Davies moves on from a topic just when she's really starting to dig into it.

In some cases, it feels like the emphasis is a bit uneven. For example, she refers to, but seldom describes in detail, beliefs about human and animal nature from the Nahua culture, leaving the reader wanting to know more, but elsewhere spends two paragraphs recounting the plot of the film *Alien*.

It's an unavoidable consequence of taking such a wide view of the topic – "what does it mean to be human" is a pretty vast subject, after all – and the question of what to explain and what not to never has a perfect solution. In the end, it's a small matter, and one that readers can resolve by reading further.

Davies articulates a view of humanity and its monsters that's grounded in cultural and intellectual history and draws both on well-known tales of "monstrous" peoples and some that are more surprising.

For example, few people would think, or at least few people would say, that women are monsters, but Davies argues that Aristotle's understanding of women as failed or incomplete men is essentially a way of thinking of women as monstrous. Even if you don't go away agreeing with the definition, it's a relevant and thought-provoking point.

Humans is a history not of humans but of humanity as an idea, and thus it's also a history not of monsters but of monstrosity as an idea. Wide-ranging, eclectic and creative, it's more about how we create monsters – and who we create them from – than it is about monsters themselves. Davies visits the freak show, but it's the audience and the proprietors she's interested in looking at.

Although there are areas that feel like they could be expanded, this is recommended reading for anyone who cares how monsters are made.

James Holloway

★★★★★

From folklore to Wicca

This short but comprehensive history of witchcraft is a good introduction

The Story of Witches

Folklore, History and Superstition

Willow Winsham

Batsford 2025

Hb, 192pp, £20, ISBN 9781849949064

A very pretty gift book to add to the long parade of folklore/occult-themed gift books published in the last few years. The illustrations are gorgeous, but is the content any good?

Thankfully, it is. Winsham has fewer than 200 pages to work with, several of which are given over to full page illustrations.

Acknowledging space limitations, she presents information drawn mainly from European and North American folklore and history and the Western magical tradition with occasional references to other cultures.

WILLOW WINSHAM
THE STORY OF
WITCHES
FOLKLORE, HISTORY AND SUPERSTITION

The book is divided into three sections covering witches in fairy tales and myth, witch hunts and modern Wicca.

I particularly enjoyed the first section, having a childhood fascination for the Russian character Baba Yaga with her house on chicken legs. We also meet Percha and La Befana and learn about the power of witches to shift their shape.

On to the witch hunts, approximately 300 years of European and US history marked by social instability: famine, civil war, religious turmoil and disease.

Blaming witches provided both an explanation for unfortunate events and reassurance that if the witch were punished, and their confederates identified and punished also, the victim's problems would end.

Many of those accused were women and were often marginalised people: the poor, widows or the quarrelsome – people who were unpopular in their communities.

This section covers what witches supposedly did, such as flying and meeting in covens, the role of Satan, identifying and punishing witches and how to protect yourself from witchcraft.

Finally, the rise of modern Wicca. Winsham recognises that much of Wicca is of recent origin, drawing on the historical record, but not an ancient religion that went underground with the coming of Christianity.

She introduces us to the originators and early proponents of Wicca including Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente, Starhawk and Alex and Maxine Sanders, and discusses how rituals were constructed from sources such as Freemasonry, acknowledging Valiente's role in rewriting Gardner's rituals in a poetic and original way.

The Wheel of the Year is outlined, with a description of the major festivals.

It's a shame about the occasional typos, especially in a book of this quality.

This is a good introduction to the subject and one which will encourage readers to want to know more.

To that end, there's a useful bibliography which guides one to more detailed works on Witchcraft in all its forms.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★

Ghosts, Trolls and the Hidden People

An Anthology of Icelandic Folk Legends

Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir

Reaktion Books 2025

Hb, 288pp, £16.95, ISBN 9781836390251

Iceland's alternative population, the trolls who lumber about in the mountains and make alarming surprise visits to people's farms, the hidden people (sometimes identified as elves) who live alongside humans in rocks and lava-formations, and the ghosts who are often terrifyingly corporeal, are becoming increasingly well known as tourism to the North Atlantic nation expands every year. The figures may be familiar, but the stories in which they feature are not, at least not beyond Iceland. Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir has selected translations of folk-tales, collected by Jón Árnason in the 19th century. Some are newly translated by Dagrún herself, others by collaborators Alice Bower and Sigurður Líndal, and others still are reprinted from the 19th-century translations made by George EJ Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon.

GHOSTS, TROLLS AND THE HIDDEN PEOPLE
AN ANTHOLOGY OF ICELANDIC FOLK LEGENDS

Although some tales belong to familiar tale-types, such as "Midwife to the Fairies" or "The Fairy-Bride", here told of human women and their relations with the hidden people, others are quite unusual, bearing no very clear resemblance to ghost- or troll-tales from elsewhere in Europe. They are intensely local, always situated within a particular landscape in the island's dramatic terrain. These pre-industrial tales share their characters – fishermen, shepherds, wives, dairymaids – with other European story repertoires, but Icelandic rural life differed in some ways from the rest of Europe. One of the book's great strengths is the effort Dagrún has made to contextualise the tales within Icelandic social history, explaining briefly the country's history, social organisation and the seasonal variations in farming tasks. She particularly emphasises the importance of the *kvöldvaka*, or evening-watch (translated here as "wake" which may be misleading). The *kvöldvaka* was a regular evening ritual, in which the household would gather in the main room of the farmhouse. Here there was warmth and candlelight, and folk would listen to tales, recited from memory or read from a hand-copied manuscript, as they undertook useful tasks such as repairing tools or darning clothes.

The tales are divided into six sections, each focusing on a particular location: the farm, the wilderness, darkness, the church and churchyard, the sea and its shore. The tales include some old favourites, such as the story of the girl who killed her illegitimate child. She wants to go dancing, but laments to her friend as they milk the sheep together that she has nothing suitable to wear. A voice from under the sheep-pen tells her not to fret, it will lend her its swaddling clothes to go dancing in. The dead child's voice sends the mother out of her mind. The tale that follows tells of a similar woman who curses the Sun as she drowns her unwanted child; consequently for 13 years she can never see the Sun until, after many years of repentance, she realises that God has forgiven her.

These are vividly told, sometimes brutal, sometimes hilarious tales which offer a wonderfully representative and engrossing conspectus of the long Icelandic past.

Carolyne Larrington

★★★★★

Code: Damp

An Esoteric Guide to British Sitcoms

Sophie Sleigh-Johnson

Repeater Books 2024

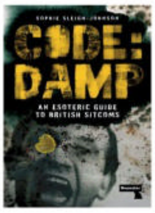
Pb, 240pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781915672070

A truism of TV sitcoms is that their humour emerges from characters being trapped in their surroundings (*Father Ted, Spaced, Steptoe and Son, Porridge*…). It's an interpretation that you might expect Sophie Sleigh-Johnson to apply in *Code: Damp: An Esoteric Guide to British Sitcoms*, but I sense it's too obvious a point for this writer. This is a singular affair – a true-one-off of a book – free of accepted takes and received wisdom.

Rather than covering a range of sitcoms, Sleigh-Johnson focuses on unearthing the codes hidden in two from the 1970s, *Rising Damp* and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald*

Perrin, both starring Leonard Rossiter. *Rising Damp* was set in a dingy shared house governed by Rossiter's leering landlord, Rigsby. In *Reginald Perrin*, Rossiter's suburban advertising executive, driven to despair by the emptiness of his career, fakes his own death.

Despite the obvious political and social commentary of both shows, Sleigh-Johnson finds them – and television itself – to be occult mirrors, and open (*All Hours*?) to scrying, the practice of divination through reflective surfaces. For her "damp" becomes an all-encompassing metaphor: a method to understand atmosphere, landscape and the passage of time. This is prime fortean territory, and familiar faces and ideas are (re)covered (e.g. Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape*, MR James, Arthur Machen) but there's an eagerness here to dig deeper past the usual folk horror sources, to draw upon theories and make connections that few writers would. This is the only book I've ever read that draws inspiration from the French artist Antonin Artaud and children's entertainers the Chuckle Brothers.



This is – to put it mildly – high-wire stuff and not to everyone's taste, as this book's appearance in *Private Eye*'s Pseuds Corner suggests. Indeed, I did even wonder at first if the whole thing was an elaborate spoof… but no, Sleigh-Johnson is all in. The book (from its title on) regularly alludes to the lyrics of Mark E Smith, maven of British alternative music; just as with Smith, the author's self-belief in her singular style brings you around to her way of thinking. Here, high and low culture are bashed together, with the experimental cut-up techniques of William Burroughs compared to the split-screen camerawork of televised darts coverage. Pretentious? Maybe. Entertaining and insightful? Definitely.

If we have the key concept of the sitcom as entrapment and that of folk horror as the excavation of dormant horrors, then Sleigh-Johnson's cryptic trip ultimately gives a sense of something once contained escaping and returning to its familiar haunts. Given where Britain is in the mid-2020s– ecologically and politically – *Code: Damp* is certainly weird and esoteric, but of contemporary relevance too. The Damp Will Rise Again, it seems…

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★

Mansion of Gloom

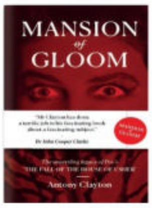
The Unsettling Legacy of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'

Antony Clayton

Accumulator Press 2024

Pb, 651pp, £25, ISBN 9780957233447

There's a moment of sheer delight when you unbox this project: a slim pamphlet of 20 pages of the full text of Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher", which is tucked into the endpapers of a giant 650-page tome that explores the story in every possible exhaustive light. It is a grand exercise in obsession and textual hoarding that feels typical, perhaps, of one of Poe's own slightly unhinged, neurotic protagonists. Form follows function!



Antony Clayton has published erudite and beautiful limited-edition books through his own Accumulator Press on *Decadent London* (about the 1890s), *Secret Tunnels of England*, and a wonderful reconstruction of Aleister Crowley's last months in a retirement home in Hastings, *Netherwood*. The Poe book is more recognisably an outsider scholar's massive work of sifting and sorting Poe's likely influences on "Usher" (including a detailed contextual survey of all the books on Roderick Usher's library mentioned in passing), the influence of the story on other literary figures in turn, and the vast number of adaptations or rewritings that have emerged since its publication in 1839. It feels at once a strange folly of the collector's completist mindset and an indispensable volume for the Poe reader.

The main body of the book features chapters on film and TV versions (over 200 pages) and in other media. The Roger Corman adaptations are all present and correct, but the depth of research into minor Italian horrors of the 1970s and beyond is impressive. I feel sure this is the only book on Poe that discusses abstruse German Romantic philosophy alongside the lyrics of Shakin' Stevens' pop song "This Ole House" in the same chapter. Hats off to Clayton, too, for not only tracking down but seemingly actually voluntarily listening to the prog rock opera in six acts of "Usher" by the baroque doomster muso Peter Hammill, who tinkered with that project for over 25 years.

The chapter on critical interpretations of "Usher" (merely 100 pages this time) gives us glimpses into the way Poe has caught other readers in this mirroring obsessional engagement. Marie Bonaparte, one of the pioneers of psychoanalysis and in Freud's close circle, published a 700-page study of Poe in 1933. She decided Poe was a "sado-necrophile" with mother issues. Early on in this critical survey, Clayton confesses he doesn't have the patience to read through the abstruse prose of the argument the French Freudian Jacques Lacan had with the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida over the interpretation of Poe's work. Clayton's prose is certainly more vital for avoiding this post-structuralist spat, but in many ways his exhaustive close reading of a single story echoes some of Derrida's perverse exercises in offering over-extended readings of texts much shorter than his own commentary.

Scholarly and eccentric, for Poe readers this is essential. Snap one up before the limited run sells out.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★★★

Memory Lane

The Perfectly Imperfect Ways We Remember

Ciara Greene & Gillian Murphy

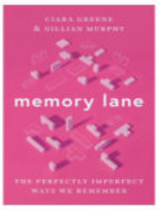
Princeton University Press 2025

Hb, 248pp, £25, ISBN 9780691257099

Ciara Greene and Gillian Murphy have produced a valuable and up-to-date overview of the strengths and weaknesses of human memory. Memory scientists often focus upon the latter and discuss forgetting as if it is always a bad thing. It certainly can be, of course, especially in legal contexts where faulty eyewitness testimony has led to numerous wrongful convictions. Such cases are well covered in this volume, but the authors also go out of their way to make the point that forgetting is essential for memory to function effectively. This point is well made in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Funes the Memorious", in which Ireneo Funes is no longer capable of forgetting anything at all. As a result, he finds everyday life simply overwhelming.

The real-life case of Jill Price is described in this book. Price is one of those very rare individuals who exhibit highly superior autobiographical memory (HSAM). Although not quite as extreme as the condition ascribed to Borges' fictional character, individuals with HSAM can respond to any given date from their lifetimes by quickly telling you what they did that day, where and with whom. Price is clear about how she feels about the condition: "I run my entire life through my head every day and it drives me crazy!!!"

Greene and Murphy's book also covers a range of other fascinating topics that have been investigated by memory researchers, including false memories, the effects of emotion on memory and the ethics of false memory research. Some of the conclusions they draw from the research literature may surprise readers. For example, when it comes to the relationship between memory and digital media, in contrast to the fears expressed by many media commentators, they conclude that: "Technology does not hack our memories in any kind of super-charged fashion." Watching a deepfake video clip can indeed distort memory – but no more than reading a text-only description of that clip.


CIARA GREENE & GILLIAN MURPHY
memory lane
THE PERFECTLY IMPERFECT WAYS WE REMEMBER

Not much in this book relates directly to fortean topics; for example, claims of alien abduction and past lives as false memories are only mentioned briefly in passing. But there's much that relates indirectly. Reports of all events, whether fortean or not, often rely ultimately on human memory. A greater appreciation of the perfectly imperfect ways we remember can only assist us in evaluating all such reports.

Christopher C French

★★★★★

Animals' concept of death

This is a bracing, rigorous, jaunty and downright brilliant study on how much animals grasp the difference between the living and the dead

Playing Possum

How animals understand death

Susana Monsó

Princeton University Press 2024
Hb, 264pp, £22, ISBN 9780691260761

Animal behaviour is often changed by the death of other animals.

A dog whose mate dies may pine for months. A bereaved mother orca or chimpanzee may carry her decaying baby with her, at great detriment to herself. Chimps often gather around the corpse of another chimp: some will watch in silence, some will engage in aggressive displays of dominance, some will make alarm calls. Elephants are far more interested in the skulls of elephants than they are in the skulls of rhinos.

These are plainly *cognitive* responses to the corpse. At least some of them might coherently be described as grief. But do they tell us anything – and if so what? – about whether non-human animals have a concept of death?

They might, says the philosopher Susana Monsó, in this bracing, rigorous, jaunty and downright brilliant book, but we've got to be careful. Those interested chimps might just be curious about the strange immobility of the corpse. The pining dog might just be regretting a change in the status quo.

Not so fast, she's always urging, when we jump to conclusions – almost always on the basis of our anthropomorphism (if we're laypeople), or our anthropocentrism (if we're philosophers, who tend instinctively to assume that human minds are the only true minds).

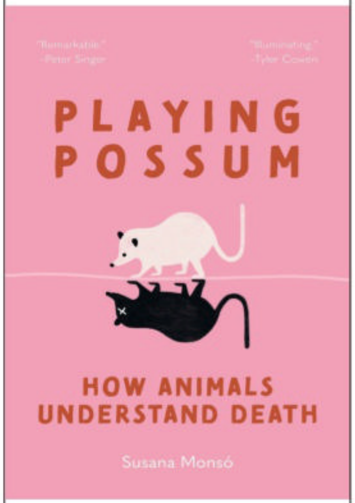
You might think that this makes for a slow book: not so. But she is systematic.

Beware, she warns us, of supposing that an animal's concept of death is *our* concept. With that caution in mind, we can begin to look intelligently at the evidence from the forests, the fields and the abattoirs.

It has been demonstrated that at least some mammals, birds, fish and spiders can distinguish between biological and non-biological behaviour – and particularly movement.

Jackdaws are suspicious of sticks that move on their own: that's not what sticks are supposed to do. Infant Japanese macaques are scared of self-propelled rocks – but their fear abates when the rocks are covered with fur.

These animals have, in other words, at least a rudimentary notion of at least one of the characteristics (movement) associated with being alive. It follows, argues Monsó, that they've taken one step towards a notion of not-being-alive. A minimal concept of death "doesn't require an explicit notion of life, but rather some implicit expectations of how [live] individuals of a certain kind typically behave". Those expectations are confounded by a corpse.


"Remarkable" –Peter Singer
"Illuminating" –Tyler Cowen
PLAYING POSSUM
HOW ANIMALS UNDERSTAND DEATH
Susana Monsó

But a concept of death demands more. It demands not just an acknowledgement of the absence in an individual of a certain set of attributes usually associated with being alive, but an appreciation of the irreversibility of that absence. Can that be shown in any non-humans?

Monsó cites the case of the birth of a (very rare) albino chimp. The other chimps in the community were apparently horrified: their hair stood on end when they looked at it. It was then killed by an alpha male. The chimps' attitude to the corpse was wholly different to their attitude to the live albino. They inspected it and touched it, evidently fascinated. This, thinks Monsó, is evidence that the perceived threat from the live baby had irreversibly vanished.

To appreciate what has *caused* a change in the biological characteristics of life might hint, too, at an appreciation of irreversibility and the existence of other elements of a true concept of death. There is surely a real intention to cause an irreversible change in many cases of death by violence – which is probably most cases of wild death. Infanticide is widespread: it connotes an intention permanently to remove the infant. A lion knows at some level the dead zebra it has killed and is eating will never gallop across the plains again.

The most compelling piece of evidence that at least some animals might have a true concept of death comes from the Virginia Opossum, featured in the book's title. If threatened with deadly danger, it feigns death very convincingly. It falls onto its side, its tongue lolls out and turns blue, its temperature, heart rate and respiratory rate all drop, and it emits a foul smell from its anal glands. If you pinched it or cut its tail, it wouldn't move.

It often fools a would-be predator. A possum that is already dead isn't so alluring, or at least may be cached rather than eaten immediately.

The opossum's strategy works because its paralysed body accords with the concept of death held by a wide range of predators. And if for a wide range of predators, why not a wide range of other animals?

Monsó has made her case convincingly.

Charles Foster

★★★★★

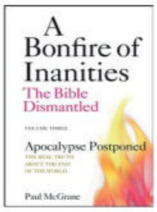
Apocalypse Postponed

The Real Truth about the End of the World

Paul McGrane

Singular Books 2024
Pb, 365pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781739392642

This is the final volume of a series entitled *A Bonfire of Inanities: The Bible Dismantled*. The first dealt with "the true ancestral and religious history of the Israelites" and the second showed how Jewish messianic beliefs influenced the New Testament and Christianity.



This one aims to show that Christian belief in an imminent apocalypse is based on misunderstanding of both Old and New Testament texts.

At times McGrane's book is over-wordy; his minute dissection of 24 Jewish and Christian apocalyptic topics that he has identified is somewhat tedious.

Despite his obvious research – the chapter on 19th-century apocalyptic sects is particularly good – he sometimes misses the wider context, or significant connections which someone with a scholarly background in religion would have seen immediately. When he mentions the Two Witnesses in Revelation, for example, he doesn't realise that they frequently appear amongst the plethora of apocalyptic prophets in today's new religious movements; one sect leader told me that in related sects he'd met five of the two witnesses...

Practically everything McGrane says about prophets, biblical authorship and so on is widely known and accepted not just by biblical scholars but also by most Christians except fundamentalists: that Old Testament prophets' writings are about contemporary events, not future ones – they didn't so much foretell as forth-tell; their role was to criticise and warn the people of Israel.

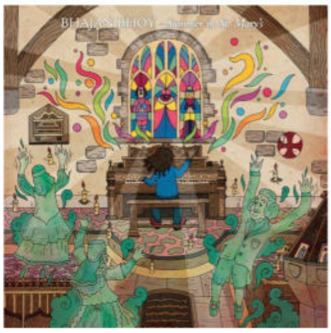
One also wonders why McGrane wrote this book and for whom; his utter contempt for believers – for their "blind faith", their "irrational blindness", "gullible crowds", "complete nonsense" and the "inanities" of the series title – becomes more than a little wearing.

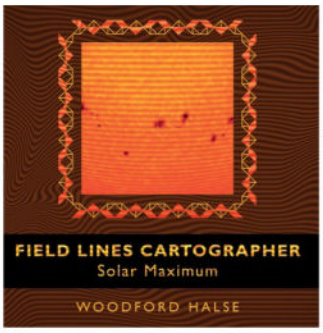
David V Barrett

★★★

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY


BHAJAN BHOY Summer in St Mary's



Forgotten Playgrounds

SYNTHETIC VILLAINS
COSMIC

WIZARDS OF THE WATCHTOWER
THE PSYCHIC CIRCLE

“There are spirits here that you immediately sense,” says Ajay Saggar. “This church is an incredibly special place – it’s so isolated from the world outside, and a lot has happened here over the last 600 years. And with us being here, right now at this very moment, we’ve become part of that timespan”.

It’s a first for this column! We’re on location. Ajay’s new double album *Summer in St Mary’s* was performed entirely on the 19th Packard Chapel organ in St Mary’s Church in South Cowton, a North Yorkshire village once immortalised in the Domesday Book but now completely vanished. Its last remaining trace? This secluded 15th century place of worship, built for the villagers during the earliest Wars of the Roses by local toff Sir Richard Conyers. On a tranquil Friday morning almost six centuries later, the only living occupants of South Cowton are Ajay and myself, sitting in pale sunshine amidst crumbling gravestones while a murder of impatient crows circles ceaselessly above. But the album, recorded over two days of blissful ecclesiastical isolation, is testament to the spirit of the place – and to Sir Richard himself, who is buried beneath the altar.

“The tracks are joyous, and the building influenced that a lot,” says Ajay. “There were alabaster effigies of Sir Richard Conyers and his two wives in there, listening to me playing that music. They were my audience”. And the organ itself? Easy to play? “I swallowed a lot of dust!” he laughs. “It came flying out of the pipes, and my lungs suffered for a week afterwards. But I think it still sounds as good as it would have done in the late 1800s.” Ajay’s album is released under his persona as Bhajan Bhoy, complete with an ebullient cover illustration of the man himself playing frantically for the jiving spectres of Sir Richard and his wives. Pull out all the stops at bhajanbhoy.bandcamp.com.

Similarly invoking the spirits of time and place are Paul Humphreys and Gregor Reid, aka Superhuman – although on this occasion the time in question is the 1970s, and the place is Glasgow. An utterly charming evocation of the duo’s shared Clydeside childhood, their new album *Forgotten Playgrounds* shamelessly raids the school music box and re-creates the halcyon days when bins were filled with crumpled cans of Irn-Bru and surrounded by clouds of angry wasps. It’s streaming now, with limited stocks of vinyl also available in the shops. Meanwhile, only slightly further south, *Chambers* is Pete Gofton’s musical homage to the spirits of Sunderland Civic Centre. Built in 1968 and demolished in 2022, this brace of Brutalist hexagons was rumoured to conceal a secret nuclear bunker, and Pete – recording as The All Golden – has poured his formative memories into a stirring synth album. Pick your way across the rubble to theallgolden.bandcamp.com.

Across the other side of the Pennines, Lancaster space cadet Richard “Synthetic Villains” Turner is looking to the stars. His new album *Cosmic* harks back to a childhood illuminated by both the adventures of orbiting NASA astronauts and the blasters and lightsabers of *Star Wars*. It’s a terrific collection, redolent of Joe Meek’s notorious 1960 sci-fi album *I Hear a New World*, and it’s currently awaiting lift-off at syntheticvillains.bandcamp.com. And in the same city, equally starstruck, is Mark “Field Lines Cartographer” Burford, whose new record *Solar Maximum* is a soothing modular tribute to the stations of the sun. Squint safely through a pinhole at fieldlinescartographer.bandcamp.com.

Also on my bleeping analogue radar this summer: *Wizards of the Watchtower* is a brilliant nod to horror-obsessed 1970s ’eavy rock by mysterious (but undoubtedly hirsute) collective The Psychic Circle, and *Fireside Spells* is Klaus Morlock’s similarly authentic celebration of the golden age of the Ribena-filled chalice. Both are available from the delightful corner of occult weirdness that is libraryoftheoccult.bandcamp.com.

But have the warming fingers of summertime left you pining for endless childhood school holidays? The drippy choc ices? The red-hot upholstery of the family car? Maybe wallow in the bittersweet melancholy of *Dreamland*, the latest release from The Balloonist. It’s the work of Midlands musician Ben Holton, and the album’s shimmering textures perfectly encapsulate the languid inertia of sticky-fingered daytrips – as well as reflecting on the tender ache of loss. “It began as an attempt to evoke my memories of travelling around the British countryside with my parents as a child,” explains Ben. “However, during its creation, my dad fell seriously ill and passed away. I found myself increasingly comforted by the sounds I made, almost burying myself in tape hiss, and the album inevitably took on a sadder tone”.

It’s a truly beautiful collection. Follow the faded road signs to waysideandwoodlandrecordings.bandcamp.com, and spare a thought on the way for the spirits of a particularly resonant time and place.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original “haunted” era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com

Away with the fairies?

A new Irish folk horror weaves buried trauma with supernatural tradition to unsettling effect

Fréwaka

Dir Aislinn Clarke, Eire 2024
Digital platforms

This is a bleak Irish Folk Horror – ninety-nine per cent of the dialogue is in Gaeilge (Irish) – involving fairy abductions, although these fairies are very much of the pagan variety and the film has a touch of *The Wicker Man* about it.

In a prologue set in 1973, mummers wearing straw masks gatecrash Peig's (Grace Collende) wedding, bringing a goat with them. Peig goes outside and disappears; her husband Daithi (Mícheál Óg Lane) just sees the goat. "Dearg Doom" by Seventies Irish rockers Horslips is playing in the background.

In the present day, we see a woman commit suicide, to be found weeks later. Her estranged daughter Shoo (Clare Monnelly) turns up with her pregnant partner Mila (Aleksandra Bystrzhitskaya) to clear out the apartment. Shoo, a careworker, is called away to care for a now invalid and isolated Peig (Bríd Ní Neachtain), who is living in a house in a remote village where the locals are reluctant to visit or deliver goods to her. Shoo has to force entry and finds the house filled with metal objects, salt and urine to keep the fairies out. The cellar door has a horseshoe and other iron pieces attached. Peig believes that she was taken by the fairies to another house underneath her own and that Daithi made a deal to get her back and then committed suicide. Most of the locals are standoffish, but one tells Shoo that Peig was once in an asylum, one of the Magdalene laundries run by the Catholic Church.

> *Most of the horror is psychological, suggested rather than shown*

The house itself, a minor stately home, is a character in its own right, although its furnishings and stuffed animals would be more typical of those from a Protestant Ascendency background, and neither Peig nor Daithi seems to fit that mould. It is large and rambling, with the ever-present cellar door providing both an attraction and a danger. A visitor might be a fairy; at least Peig thinks so.

Most of the horror here is psychological, suggested rather than shown, except when Peig and Shoo reveal their scars (both physical and mental) to each other and the odd violent scene. Shoo's relationship with Mila also becomes strained. We are left wondering just how much of what Shoo observes is actually real – and we have good reason to question it, given her diagnosis of dementia. Goats are a constant motif, as is a strange boy, along with Catholic religious imagery and statuettes.

All of the threads eventually tie together, suggesting (to me at least) that there really is an occult/supernatural explanation for the events. As well as Horslips, Irish composer Die Hexen provides a haunting score. I thought Horslips' version of "King of the Fairies" would have fitted better than "Dearg Doom", but everyone's a critic these days.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★☆

Project Silence

Dir Kim Tae-gon, South Korea, 2023
Digital platforms, 4K, Blu-ray & DVD

Anyone who enjoys world cinema is probably familiar with Korean filmmakers' ability to spin tense tales that capture the darker aspects of humanity with unflinching earnestness, often imbuing such stories with political commentary that adds to the films' depth rather than bogging the proceedings down.

In *Project Silence*, the late Lee Sun-kyun leads the cast as Cha Jeong-won, a political aide struggling to connect with his teenage daughter after his wife's passing. Shrouded in an impenetrable fog, father and daughter begin making their way across Incheon Bridge, but their journey is brought to a halt when a reckless thrill-seeker causes a massive pile-up on the middle of the bridge. In the aftermath of the crash, it quickly becomes clear the survivors have bigger problems than road safety to worry about, as a pack of dogs from a secret military project have escaped their transport, and the motley crew have to fight for their survival on the increasingly unstable bridge.

As Korean thrillers go, *Project Silence* has many familiar components, mixing action, horror, suspense, untrustworthy authority figures and institutions with SF elements, all of which have the potential for quality entertainment; but the film unfortunately lacks bite.

At a mere 96 minutes, it's quick to set up its premise, but in spite of swift, straightforward progression into the film's central conflict of civilians besieged by genetically engineered mutts, the sense of urgency and dread never mounts sufficiently, and the film struggles to maintain tension during its modest runtime.

To an extent, this is because of the dogs – they never truly feel intimidating, which is partly due to the animals being digital creations that leave a fair bit to be desired. Thankfully, the digital dogs are not overused, and as is the case with many a menacing beast of celluloid terrors past, less is often more; but this would still require the dogs' screen presence to be impactful, and these pups have got nothing on Cujo. However, the lack of suspense can't entirely be blamed on the CGI canines, as the human characters are ultimately responsible for maintaining the momentum when the animals are off-screen, and while the performances are serviceable, the character dynamics unfortunately leave a lot to be desired. The characters fulfil various stereotypes often seen in disaster films; this can enable a wide array of viewers to easily invest in them, but *Project Silence* simply lacks sufficiently compelling writing to make them more than formulaic stock characters.

Naturally, these criticisms could be viewed as the inevitable result of taking a silly film seriously, but while the premise of *Project Silence* certainly lends itself to silliness, the film regrettably takes itself too seriously to work as a fun, far-fetched romp: *Train to Busan* it is not.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★☆☆☆

TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS cast an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

"These woods are haunted" is not an unusual statement to hear, but proof of it can be harder to come by – which is where Discovery boldly steps in with its programme of the same name. Following the tried-and-tested template of *Paranormal Witness*, *'These Woods are Haunted'* features the real-life experiences of flannel-shirt clad locals who have gone down to the woods and been in for a big surprise (and not a pleasant one). Each episode consists of two stories with the unifying theme being – you guessed it – people getting the willies in the woods, with the actual experiencers telling their story against a blank background while it's recreated on location by actors. There's fun to be had with the casting; while many of the roles are taken by performers with at least a passing resemblance to their real-life counterparts, in some cases the comparison could be described as generous and in others as outrageous, with one terrified, white-haired gentleman apparently being played by Dick Van Dyke (it's unclear whether his terror came from his experience or being portrayed by an accent-mangling ex-chimney sweep).

A polt in the pulpit, chanting in the chancel and terror in the toilet

Despite the title, the proportion of straight haunting stories is quite low, instead leaning heavily towards cryptids, demonics and, indeed, demonic cryptids. However, what the ghost segments lack in quantity they compensate for in quality. Of particular note, 'The Church In The Woods' (S3E1) features a dilapidated chapel, in an otherwise idyllic glade, undergoing renovation. Due to repeated vandalism at night, the builders engaged security guards to keep an eye on it. These were not your superannuated supermarket guardians, but no-nonsense, former police or military personnel who, nonetheless, rarely lasted beyond a single night-shift. A chilling account comes from one of the most experienced officers, including a polt in the pulpit, chanting in the chancel and unholy terror in the toilet. Graveyards, cemeteries and crypts are a frequent feature of the stories: it seems there are a significant number of long-abandoned villages and communities which the forest has since reclaimed, adding another layer of spookiness to the already unsettling setting.

Aside from ghosties and ghoulies, the programme has a strong focus on the beasties. Dogmen and the occasional dubious werewolf get a paw in, but perhaps the majority are about the big hairy bloke. And he doesn't half get around: from the Pacific Northwest to the subtropical Southeast and all points between. A particularly well-told case features in Series 3 – 'I Don't Want To Be Forced Out' – about a family home in Oklahoma subjected to frequent and aggressive attacks by multiple Bigfeet, with remarkable real-life footage being spliced into the dramatisation. Well-made and well-worth your time.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Some horror films aim to scare, others to satirise, and some just want to bite your face off. This month, I've been digesting three very different entries in the horror canon – each one obsessed, in its own way, with consumption. Whether it's an alien dessert product turning Americans into addicts, a mime from Hell with a hacksaw, or a prehistoric predator lurking in the deep, these films all hunger for something.

Larry Cohen's *The Stuff* (1985) is a lively horror satire that asks: what if ice cream took on sentience and killed us all? Of course, it's not only about that – it's also a sharp critique of how quickly we'll sell our souls for a sweet taste and a bit of marketing. Yet what makes Cohen's film great is that it's both brilliant satire *and* the best killer yoghurt film ever made. Arrow Video's new 4K restoration is a treat, cleaning up the gooey visuals without sacrificing the grimy charm of its Reagan-era critique. The real bonus here is the inclusion of a 'Pre-Release Version' – less polished, rawer in tone, and fascinating for fans of horror history. It's like unearthing a VHS relic. *The Stuff* still sticks, and in some ways, it's sharper than ever.

If *The Stuff* is biting satire, *Terrifier* (Signature Entertainment, 4K UHD) is just… biting. And slashing. And flaying, with Damien Leone's Art the Clown showing his sadistic appetite for extreme violence. Art's first outing is best described as a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon rendered as a horrific crime scene photo. It's relentless, gratuitous, and – depending on your horror constitution – either a grindhouse gem or a grotesque endurance test. But if you've ever longed to see Marcel Marceau hacking a body from one end t'tother, this one's for you. The practical effects gleam with ghastly precision in 4K – like a butcher proudly displaying his best cuts – and the low budget doesn't seem to affect the sick tension throughout.

It's both brilliant satire and the best killer yoghurt film ever made

Reminding us that it's a case of eat or be eaten, *Fear Below* (Signature Entertainment, digital platforms and DVD) plunges us into Australian waters, where an ancient shark stirs. Those bored (or obsessed) with the sharksploitation genre may be intrigued (or put off) by the style of this one. It's more like a period crime thriller than a traditional creature feature, but the murky underwater shark moments are tense, and the premise is compelling. There's a clear reason why these folk keep going into the dangerous water – and for once, it's not just plot convenience.

So what connects a deadly dessert, a killer clown from Hell, and a giant shark? Hunger. Whether it's for sugar, violence, or gold and survival, these films remind us that horror can begin with a craving. A desire unmet. A need unfulfilled.

And if there's one thing horror knows, it's this: once we get a taste, we always want more.

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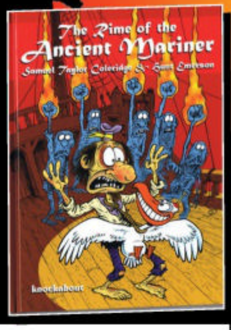
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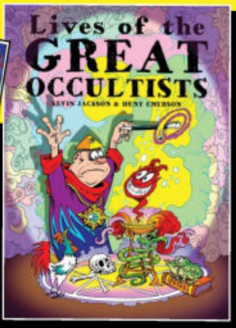
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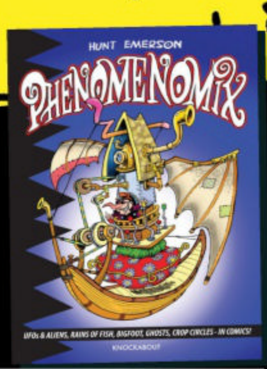
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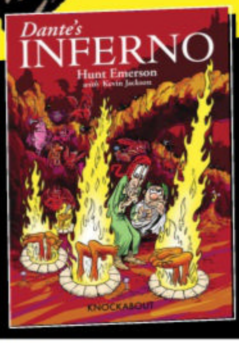
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LETTERS

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Spirits – holy and otherwise

Regarding 'Fairies, Folklore and Forteana: Last Ladies of the Lake' [**FT457:25**], it seems significant that the Kinder "Mermaid" is sighted on Easter Eve. In the Catholic Church calendar this date is Holy Saturday, the vigil which is held between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and the occasion on which the congregation symbolically renews their Baptismal vows. Could the Kinder "Mermaid" be a lingering memory of this particular liturgy and its focus on baptism (in this instance by full immersion); with the belief that whoever sees her will never die, corresponding to the assurance that those who believe in Christ shall be granted eternal life?

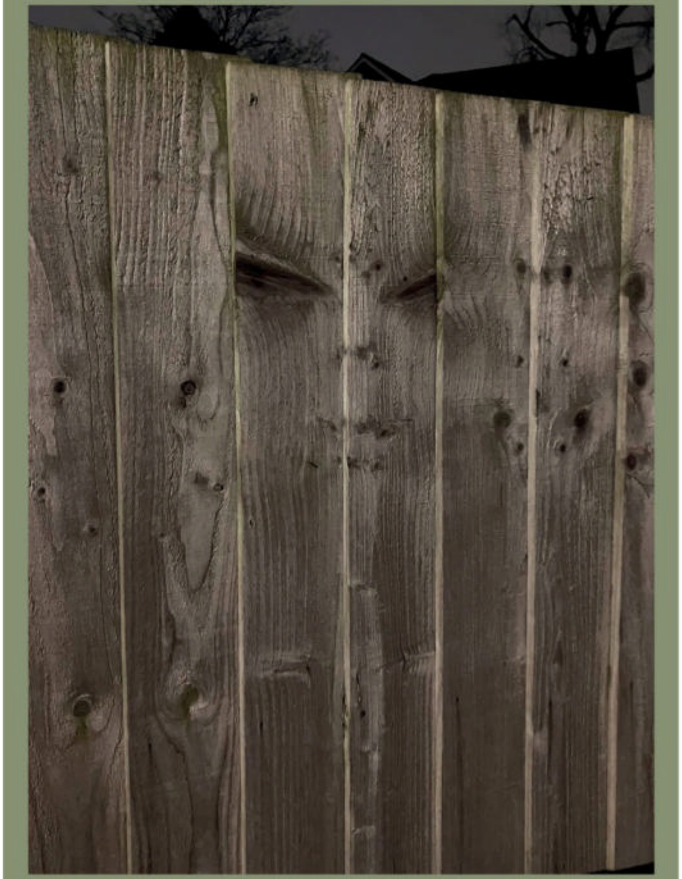
The Protestant faith formally abolished these distinctive Catholic observances; but, far from dying out, many such customs and beliefs went "underground" and became part of the local folklore – see Ronald Hutton's *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain.*

- Regarding your latest Ghostwatch: 'A nation in low spirits' [**FT 457:16-18**]: here in York we have more than our fair share of haunted hostelries. At least two of these were the homes of local Lord Mayors and their families until the 18th century, when they were converted into pubs. My own speculation is that such houses were *already* haunted. The Georgian era was an age of ever-increasing travel, an age that saw the rise of the coaching inn. So a family living in a home beleaguered by spectres and poltergeists would have been only too pleased to find the socio-economic circumstances of the time made it possible for them to sell their property as a potential hospitality venue – thus abandoning the old haunted bedchamber to the unwary traveller, who, following a night of horrid experiences, would no doubt resolve never to pass that way again…

I myself had one such experience whilst staying in a picturesque old mediæval inn on the Welsh/Hereford border. I woke up in the middle of the night in a pitch-black room and, whilst not actually *seeing* anything, I felt such a terrible tension in the air that it was impossible to get back to sleep. There was certainly *something* there…

Julie Speedie
York

SIMULACRA CORNER



Will Maclean noticed this alien trapped in a wooden fence while picking up his daughter from school in London.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Visible from space?

Karl Shuker reports on the coral reef off the island of Malaulo in the Solomon Islands as being 34m (112ft) wide by 32m (105ft) long [**FT453:20**] – So huge, in fact, that it is actually visible from Outer Space. These measurements work out at 1,88m^2 (11,760ft^2), or in-easier-to-imagine terms, just over four doubles tennis courts. I'm sure an object this size could not be seen from above the Kármán line (62km 100m), the accepted beginning of Space, Inner or Outer.

Malcolm Henderson
By email

Harvey

Re the film *Harvey* [**FT457:68**]. It has been many years since I saw it (I was a child, no more than eight or nine years old, and I am now 62) but I seem to remember the closing scene being Jimmy Stewart and Harvey walking off together. Is this the Mandela Effect in action again? [Yes – Ed.]

Christopher Dean
By email

Cannock Chase

I was interested to see Cannock Chase feature yet again in the pages of FT, this time as part of the Ghostwatch column [**FT455:18-21**] and was in broad agreement with Alan Murdie's points about uncritical reporting and creeping myth-making. I hope I am in a position to throw some light on the origins of at least one aspect of the wide-ranging mythology of the Chase: werewolves.

I am part of a small but enthusiastic UK community that takes part in the sport of dryland mushing. Put simply, we're sled-dog racers racing without snow (although we live in hopes every winter). There has been an active part of this community training, and in the past racing, on Cannock Chase since the 1980s. Our need to work with low temperatures for the health and safety of our dogs means that as well as largely being confined to autumn and winter months, we're usually out training in early mornings or in the dark of the evening.

So, for many years on Cannock Chase, in dark evenings and early mornings when most sensible people are tucked up in bed, there have been excited teams of huskies, howling and running around in the forest, quietly, and lit by headtorches and bike lights. I think we can trace at least some post-pub tales of spooky lights in the trees and eerie, wolf-like howls to our training activities.

Now, this is not to say we've collectively been without our own spooky moments. I know fellow mushers who've encountered unsavoury individuals, and one close friend saw a young woman in 'old-fashioned dress' emerge barefoot from the fog, walk across a trail, and then disappear back into the murk. We also sadly once had a member of our group discover a body. However, I don't know of anyone who has spotted a Pig-Man or seen a UFO.

Rob McKay
Cannock Chase Sled Dog Group, Staffordshire

LETTERS

Vanishing horseman

Reading the article by Simon Young on disappearing strangers [**FT455:27**], I was reminded of the following article from *Magikon*, a German periodical published from 1840 through 1853, and edited by Justinus Kerner. The excerpt is from vol.1, p.175, and translated by myself. It details an incident that was reported to the chronicler by an acquaintance – an incident that had occurred 10 years earlier. Of course, the writer vouches for the integrity and reliability of the man, M.R. Its authenticity might also be vouched for by the lack of any uncanny details other than the peculiar disappearance. One might expect an invented tale to be rather more exciting. In any case, the report states:

Magikon.

Archiv für Beobachtungen

Gebiete der Geiſterkunde

Blätter aus Prevorſt.

“The man, M.R., with his wife, two children, and his servant left home around 12 noon in order to visit a neighbouring town. The weather was especially beautiful and clear.

“The group had travelled about three rifle shots distance away from town when the children, whose nature it is to notice anything especially interesting, saw a rider approaching at a fast trot on his horse. The adults then immediately saw the horseman as well. The rider was seated on a Moorish steed. He had a round, grey hat on his head, and was dressed rather finely. As he came nearer, he looked to be about 50 years old. Angrily, M.R. called to his servant, ‘Why have you let the dog run free! You know it’s rude to let the dog spring up at the horse and cause it to shy. Put a collar on him so that the gentleman does not meet with misfortune.’ While these words were said, the rider had already come so near that his face could be clearly seen. The servant hurriedly made a sideways lunge after the dog, during which, for not more than two or three seconds, all their eyes were distracted, and when they looked around again, there was no sign of the horse and rider. To the left of the highway on which the group found themselves at this moment was an upward slope 150 feet [46m] wide. Beyond that was a rather steep vineyard, which extended farther upward. To the right of the road was farmland that was eight feet [2.4m] higher than the road and which was separated from the road by an embankment.

“Instinctively, the three adults scrambled up over the edge of the embankment where they could look out on the surrounding area on all sides. No one saw a trace of the horseman. However, they noted a pedestrian coming toward them who they all had seen strolling a few hundred steps behind the horseman. Because the horseman would have been moving much faster than the pedestrian, it seemed that the horseman must have passed the pedestrian a few minutes earlier. When the pedestrian was near enough to speak to, they asked him if he had seen the horseman coming this way. To their great astonishment, the other insisted that he had seen neither horse nor rider; though, he had seen M.R. and his companions suddenly climbing onto the embankment of the farmland and looking around.

“It was a festival day. The weather was clear. They passed 10 or 12 people coming in the opposite direction in which they were going, but no one had seen the horse and rider. There were no side roads, or even any hidden areas off the road where the horseman could have ridden.”

Christopher Lynch
By email

David Lynch

A quick correction to your otherwise great obituary of David Lynch [**FT455:26-27**]. The name of the film where Lynch made his final screen appearance (as film director John Ford) is entitled *The Fablemans*, not *Meet The Fablemans*. Perhaps the author was thinking of the 1989 Muppet-parody, *Meet The Feebles* from future *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson? Although, having seen both films, they are pretty hard to mix up!

Chris Ettle
Bath

Ghost Army & Mormons

The excellent article on the Ghost Army of World War II [**FT457:28-35**] reminds me of the camouflage on the Pirelli factory in Eastleigh. The outer walls were painted to look like rows of terraced houses. There are a number of old photos online; I recall passing the factory in the 1970s when the effects were still visible.

- Further to Mikita Brottman’s ‘Murderous Mormons’ [**FT457:47**], there is a Netflix series, which I believe came out earlier this year, called *American Primeval*. Set in 1857, it featured the historically real Mountain Meadows Massacre, where a group of the Mormon militia disguised as Native Americans murdered the members of a California-bound wagon train. This was in the context of the Utah War between the Mormons and the US Government. The Mormons felt that the Government was going to restrict their way of life, and they weren’t happy, to say the least.

- When reading ‘When the cuckoo calls’ [**FT457:48-49**], I couldn’t help thinking that the colliery (and other industry) managers must have been very trusting souls, to close for the day on the word of one of their employees. I can’t believe it’s that simple. Regarding the egg-laying ‘scam’ the cuckoo carries out, I’ll paraphrase from the website whyevolutionistrue.com. There are seven ‘types’ of female, referred to as gentes. Each of the gentes has a differently appearing egg, in the same way that humans have different eye colours, for example. and each lays its egg in the nest of the matching host. Once the egg has hatched and the fledgeling has matured, it subsequently lays its egg in the nest of the same host species, because at birth it imprinted on that species.

Dave Miles
By email

The Haunted Factory

I’m writing with a postscript to ‘The Haunted Factory’ [**FT369:55**, Aug 2018] in which Ray Newman describes tales of deaths and hauntings at the old British Cellophane factory in Bridgwater in Somerset. By chance I recently saw a post by Ray on social media in which he mentioned his dad having worked for British Cellophane.

This jogged a memory: in the late 1970s there was a bit of fad for Ouija boards. Indeed I think a mainstream boardgame company like Parker Bros may even have produced a version. It seems odd now, but 10-year-old me took part in Ouija board sessions with my adult siblings and parents. The only thing I recall is that we were ‘contacted’ by someone who said he worked for British Cellophane and mentioned a pub called the Ring O’Bells. I mentioned this

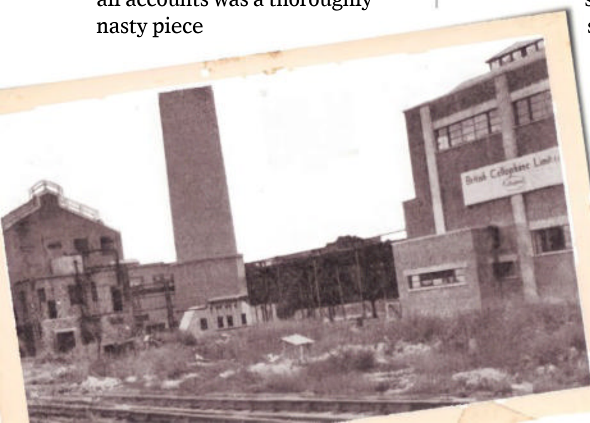
to Ray who put me on to his 2018 article, and the coincidence is indeed striking. Were we contacted by one of the workers killed in the factory? Ray even confirmed there is indeed a pub called the Ring O'Bells in Ashcott, a village about 10 miles (16km) from the factory.

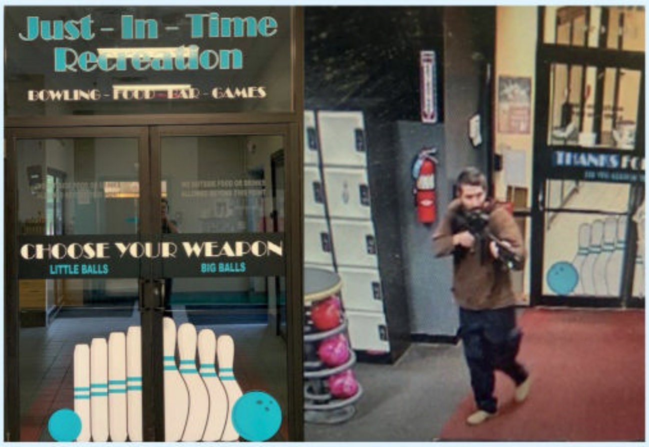
My brother, the only other living (!) member of the 1970s family Ouija board party, confirms the detail about British Cellophane. He said we were also given a name (we can't remember it). He called the company at the time and they said they'd never heard of him.

Had a family member heard the same stories Ray heard as a child and was pushing the glass? We lived in North Somerset, which seems close enough, but we had no links with Bridgwater, which in those days seemed a world away.

The family Ouija board sessions stopped abruptly. I don't know whether my parents and siblings got too spooked, or if it was the influence of our village vicar who, my mother told me, spoke out against dabbling with the dead in such ways.

Giles Booth
London





Choose your weapon

In Lewiston, Maine, at the 25 October 2023 mass shooting, the gunman (armed with AR-15 assault weapon) had to enter the front door of the Just-In-Time Recreation bowling alley through a sign that read "CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON".
Jeffrey Vallance, *by email*

Lord Mohun

The piece about the Duke of Hamilton haunting Black Sally's Tree in Hyde Park [**FT455:68-69**], after being killed by Lord Mohun in a duel, brought to mind another story about Lord Mohun. I read about it in a book called *Haunted Warwickshire* by Meg Elizabeth Atkins.

In the late 17th century a Covent Garden actress/singer called Anne Bracegirdle rebuffed the advances of 'gentlemen' in higher stations in life, in preference to a humble actor called William Mountford. This seriously annoyed Lord Mohun and his companion, Captain Hill, who by all accounts was a thoroughly nasty piece of work. One night after some heavy drinking, Lord Mohun held William Mountford whilst Hill stabbed him several times. Hill then went on the run, stopping at a place called Moat House, which was inhabited by a family called Mohun (not too sure if they were related to Lord Mohun), in some woodland known as Moon's Moat, at a place called Beoley (the house has now gone and Moon"s Moat has become a combined industrial/housing estate and nature reserve). The house itself was said to be haunted by the ghost of a woman every St Agnes's Eve (20 January).

The local constable happened to be nearby at this time and heard some screaming coming from the house. He got there to see what appeared to be a body land in the moat from the house walls. Although he thoroughly dragged the moat next morning, nothing was found except for a serge cloak. However, the daughter of the house, Mariolle, thought to be in London, was never seen again, rousing the constable's suspicions that something bad, but unprovable, had happened.

Hill then arrived at Alcester in Warwickshire. He put up at the Angel (now a private house). Initially he behaved himself and ingratiated himself into local society. One night though he got kicked out of a house party after he reverted to type. He went back to the Angel, where he was heard muttering threats of vengeance against the people who kicked him out. He was never seen after that night though. The landlady claimed that he had returned to London.

By the nineteenth century the Angel had become a private residence. When some alterations were carried out in the house, an old oven with some articles belonging to Captain Hill were found. After that people claimed to have seen apparitions which they assume are associated with the deceased Captain Hill – implying that he had maybe met an untimely end there. Couldn't have happened to a nicer person!

Gary Stocker
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire

Spiral staircases

As a history buff, I am a keen reader of Mat Coward's excellent and informative Mythcon column. That said, I believe that there is a logical error in number 288 and the research of the University of Chester on spiral staircases in castles [**FT455:25**].

As Mat and the academics at Chester well know, the original castles in England were almost all of the motte and bailey type. These were built in England (Wales, Scotland and on the Continent) between the 10th and, perhaps, the 13th century. For practical purposes, in Britain, it would be best to say between 1066 and 1266.

The motte and bailey form is a very effective fortification when the potential enemy lacks sophistication in siegecraft. The central defence of the motte and bailey castle is the 'keep', or the stone tower that forms the citadel of the castle. The spiral staircase is within and forms a part of the structure of the keep/tower, giving access to the various keep/tower levels including the main, crenelated, fighting platform at the top of the keep/tower.

The only way for an unsophisticated enemy to take the keep/tower by main force (as opposed to starvation) is to: a) occupy the bailey which is typically only protected by a timber stockade; b) brave the missiles fired and dropped upon them from the crenelated top and firing slits of the keep/tower; c) force the portal (doorway/gate) of the keep/tower; and, d) fight their way up the keep/tower's spiral staircase; and e) overcome the defending forces stationed there.

For the defenders of the keep, defeating the enemy fighting its way up the spiral staircase is the critical objective. Thus (as most swordsmen are right-handed) the counter-clockwise turn of the spiral staircase is an important advantage. mediæval re-enactors will quickly confirm this.

Once the enemy achieves a level of sophistication in siegecraft, the equation changes. When the force attacking a castle is equipped with stone-throwing artillery (ballistæ, trebuchets, etc.) and, especially, military sappers (miners who tunnel to undermine the fortification and cause its collapse), the necessity to pursue a costly main force attack up the spiral staircase is eliminated.

Therefore, in making a historical survey of the spiral staircases in the extant historical examples, castles completed after, say, 1266 and all castles not constructed on the motte and bailey model should be eliminated from the study. If this is done, I believe that the clockwise twist will be clearly confirmed.

Thomas J Hakala
By email

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Chippewa River Encounter

On 12 August 2019 my wife and I had a strange encounter while fishing on the Chippewa River in northwest Wisconsin. We were anchored about 30 yards (27m) away from the eastern back of the river in one of my favourite fishing spots. Early in the afternoon the woods downstream and to our left suddenly erupted with a loud sound of crashing and breaking timber. My initial impression was that "something" extremely large in size was charging through the forest towards us. My sense was that this "thing" was ripping large branches off the trees and was not going to stop at the edge of the river.

The frightening crashing sounds lasted just a few seconds. The woods and the area around the boat became completely silent. Next, I heard the cry of a wild turkey in distress in the same spot where the crashing sounds had occurred. I immediately looked at my wife and exclaimed: "In all of my years hunting and fishing I have never heard anything like that before!" I pulled out my Iphone 7+ and started filming the area near the edge of the river from where these frightening sounds had emanated. While filming I started to see what I can only describe as small white objects that were appearing and quickly disappearing in the undergrowth just a foot or two above the ground. This strange activity was in or slightly upstream from where we heard the loud crashing sounds. I observed these small white objects for about a minute before they quickly disappeared. At this point, I believed that some kind of large predator had attacked a wild turkey.

The type of predators that inhabit this part of Wisconsin that I believe are capable of attacking a wild turkey are wolves, black bears, bobcats, and cougars. Bearing that in mind, I quickly jumped out of the boat and waded to shore about 30 yards (27m) upstream from the area of the disturbance. With my Iphone in hand I hit the play button and began to record my cautious walk to the site of the attack. Upon arriving in the spot where I believed the attack occurred I observed a flattened area of ferns that was littered with a variety of wild turkey feathers from various parts of its body. I immediately got the sense that I was being watched. I nervously scanned the area around me hoping I could find the body of a recently predated wild turkey, but found none. There was no blood. Just the ground cover flattened and disturbed that contained the feathers.

> **"I reviewed the footage... To my shock and surprise, I could clearly see those small white objects"**

The attack site was in a beautiful glade hidden just inside the tree line on the edge of the river. It was covered with a variety of ferns and other types of lush vegetation. I investigated the area in and around the glade and found a second smaller site about 25 feet (7.6m) upstream in some dense undergrowth. It was also disturbed and flattened. This secondary site also contained turkey feathers. I expected to see large broken branches and other signs of the loud disturbance we had experienced only minutes before; but there was no other evidence that this scary event had ever occurred. Just the two sites with the flattened vegetation that contained the wild turkey feathers. After a thorough and complete investigation of the surrounding area I made my way back to the boat.

Later that evening at our cabin I reviewed the video footage. To my utter shock and surprise, I could clearly see those small white objects. They appeared to be silver or white-coloured orbs just a few inches in diameter. They were accompanied by luminous material that was snaking its way through the undergrowth next to the river. I refer to this anomaly as "living luminous liquid". There was also an area on the forest floor in the undergrowth that contained a pulsing luminous object. I refer to this as the "luminous mass". Some of the orbs appeared to be entering and exiting the "luminous mass" at extremely high speed. The "luminous mass" was exhibiting a boiling and flashing type of behaviour. It appeared to be located in the same spot where I found the secondary attack site. A few of the orbs exited the luminous mass at extremely high speeds. They travelled vertically towards a larger stationary orb elevated in the forest canopy above the primary site of attack.

It is hard for me to wrap my head around the idea that there may indeed be a colony of luminous predatory orbs/energies that haunt the forests of northwest Wisconsin that are capable of attacking a wild turkey. If so, are they capable of attacking and even killing a larger prey item like a human being? Is it possible that these predaceous luminous entities are not just restricted to the forests of Wisconsin and may be inhabiting other forested regions throughout the US? Is there a connection between the presence of these predatory luminous objects and some of the mysterious and well documented disappearances of people in Wisconsin?

The fact remains that I did catch some mysterious objects on camera that I don't recognise as known Wisconsin forest inhabitants near the banks of the Chippewa River. These are not the only anomalies I have recorded on video in and around this glade of high strangeness. You can view those on my Caught On Camera Page at creepyencounters.com

Here is the video that shows the anomalies that I caught on camera during the encounter: https://vimeo.com/487361103

Jay Bradley
By email

Do fairies like glasses?

With the recent letters about fairies helping to find lost things, I wanted to share my stories about fairies stealing things (allegedly).

Something like 10 years ago, during a storm in rural Belgium, a big tree fell in my garden, and was obstructing the farm track/public pathway next to my house. It was already late afternoon, in winter, and it was getting dark, but we wanted to clear the track as soon as possible (so that farmers on their tractor could reach their fields the next morning, where other trees had fallen). As my then partner was cutting the branches and throwing them over our fence, on a big pile in our garden, one of the branches got stuck in his glasses and the glasses and the branch were thrown together over the fence in an ample gesture. I witnessed the whole thing, and was convinced that the glasses were on the other side of the fence, on the pile of branches, or maybe just somewhere between the path and the pile of branches. They were not. As the night fell, we went home and decided to look for the lost glasses the next morning. We never found them. They were new, expensive spectacles, so we really wanted to find them. We disentangled the pile of branches, one by one. We looked everywhere around the fallen tree, the fence, the bushes; in the adjacent gardens and fields; up in the bare trees (it was winter, so no leaf). Nothing. We didn't ask the fairies for help.

Fast forward to seven years ago, also in rural Belgium, but next to a beautiful reservoir lake in the middle of the forest. My then partner, our son and I had been swimming in the lake on a very hot summer afternoon, and established camp on the shores, among magnificent beech trees. When it was time to leave, my son removed his sunglasses to put his T-shirt back on. As we were walking back to our car, after only 100 metres or so, he realised that he had forgotten his sunglasses and we went back to fetch them, confident that they would be just where we were less than five minutes earlier. They were not. We never found them. We didn't ask the fairies for help either, but could not help connecting this incident to the previous one.

Since then, we always joke about wood creatures wearing our lost specs. But I blame the fairies.

Catherine Dupont
Habergy, Belgium

Hypnagogic/ hypnopompic

The interesting column on hypnagogic and hypnopompic states and explosive head syndrome [**FT457:14**] provoked a memory for me. Sometime in the mid to late 1960s, when I was in my teens, I remember being in bed falling asleep when I suddenly jerked fully awake to see with horror a huge, crimson spider slither down the wall at the foot of my bed. The clincher for me that it was absolutely real was that it actually disappeared behind the foot of the bed as if heading for the floor under my bed! My subsequent screams brought my parents rushing to my side but, of course, they found nothing at all under the bed, certainly no giant red arachnid.

Many years later I realised it was a hypnagogic hallucination after reading about the phenomenon in some magazine.

As for Explosive Head Syndrome (EHS), I experience this several times a year now I'm in my 70s, being regularly woken by a loud noise apparently right by my head; often it takes the form of sudden sharp barking as though a dog was by my bedside.

Incidentally, I first heard of EHS quite recently while watching the latest series of *Uncanny* following your amusing review [**FT456:55**].

Tony Purcell
Sheffield, South Yorkshire

One lucid dream was of a semi-transparent spider moving slowly across the carpet.

Seeing David Hambling's column on hypnogogic and hypnopompic imagery [**FT457:14**] reminded me of several incidents of my own in this area and – yes – they are different emotionally from lucid dreams as they are viewed dispassionately by me as an observer. Funnily enough, one was of a semi-transparent spider moving slowly across the carpet. It looked for all the world like a reflection in a shop window. Normally I freak out at seeing real spiders as I am an arachnophobe. I also see what I can only describe as mini-black holes out of the corner of my eye that I sometimes think might be spiders from the size and shape, but direct vision causes this to be clarified and the elusive spots disappear.

On the subject of hooded figures, both my wife and I saw these. She saw one behind me in the kitchen in broad daylight, in one place we lived and I saw one in another house we lived in a few years later, just as I turned off the bedroom light one night on retiring.

I also woke one morning in the early hours because I thought that I heard the front door bell ring but no one was there. The following day at about the same time there was knocking at the front door. Again I got up and there was no one there. In both these cases neither the dog nor my wife reacted. The interesting bit is that a few days later a poltergeist incident occurred, when the rubber on the squeegee was pulled out a few inches and so was the plastic in one of the shower doors. This therefore is different, especially as the first incident occurred on the day one of my wife's brothers died in the local hospital. He had visited our house while in hospital for cancer treatment, but lived in The Western Isles of Scotland (we live in The Highlands).

I have had other incidents of nocturnal visitations and even daylight ones, so dispute that these are necessarily hallucinations because of their connections to other things in my life, and therefore might be considered meaningless experiences.

Tony Sandy
By email

Enjoyable episodes

Over the years I've had a great many strange experiences in alternative states of consciousness. Here are three.

The first happened several times over a few years. During the night, not asleep nor awake in the usual sense of either word, I found myself floating in pleasant blackness, and sort of spinning in all directions on a central axis. It felt as if I was spinning in different directions at once, and was euphoric. Very enjoyable. I found myself laughing within this altered state, rather than outwardly in physical form.

The next incident was a one-off. Again in blackness and in an apparently altered state, I found myself sensing a rushing, upward movement, as if I were ascending like a rocket. As I increased altitude and speed, a shrill whistling noise, rather like an old-fashioned kettle, became more and more intense until 'pop'; it reached an endpoint and I awoke into a normal waking state. Again, there was a feeling of euphoria. More of an adrenalin rush than the relaxing incident previously described.

The last one was also an isolated incident. In a strange, dreamlike state, but more like a lucid dream (of which I've had many), I was suddenly presented with an animated pattern. Against a background of what looked like the school graph paper of my childhood, a number of symbols and characters seemed to spin outwards from the centre. They had simple colours, perhaps pastels, and rotated as they spun outwards. Letters and other characters were present, and upon waking up I was sure there was some meaning to it all, but I've never solved the mystery.

Tom Vanheems
London

LETTERS

Alex Cleghorn's fate

I received an email through my website from 'Don', a serving police officer, who would prefer to remain anonymous (though he has given me his name and credentials). He writes: "I read with interest your fascinating summary of the disappearance of Alex Cleghorn from Govan Road in Glasgow in 1966. ('Alex Cleghorn Disappears', **FT448:64-65**).
"I am a serving police officer, with extensive experience of commanding high-risk missing person cases of both children and adults. While not an expert on the mysterious teleportation of humans, I *am* an expert on the much more mundane topic of police procedures and missing pe56rson investigations. As (you) highlighted, there are several relevant facts present within the various reports but also a lack of some facts that are now lost to time.

"Regarding the lack of information that the police claim to hold, the simple answer is that it was 1966. Police records, except for the most serious cases, would be more limited than they would be today; and very little of that would be retained in a non-digital format, with much of the paper records likely destroyed or lost. The newspaper would probably hold more details of this than the police.

"Focusing on the interesting disappearance, that the police confirm the investigation remains 'live' does mean very clearly that Alex, to their knowledge, has never been found dead or alive. This is an obvious point but one that deserves emphasising as there is occasionally a view that police may withhold information of this nature from a family or the public; this isn't the case here. Further, all deaths would be a matter for the public record."

(Just to interject here, in my research for *Alex Cleghorn Disappears*, I heard from someone that it was a rumour – rather than a fact – that Alex had disappeared at a 'close mouth' (local slang for the entrance to a tenement building) and information from the Unsolved Murders website claimed that he disappeared between the turn-offs of Rathlin Street and McKechnie Street. My attempts to discover if there *was* a tenement building in-between both streets have been unsuccessful.)

Don continues: "I note your research regarding the tenement building, and if accurate, this may present a very different set of circumstances. However, from a missing person investigating approach, the River Clyde would be a location of critical interest.

"Intoxicated males, in some situations, are very prone to falling into bodies of water, often with tragic consequences. It is thought that they are drawn to the location to urinate, and do not process the full danger of what they are doing nor have any great capacity to escape from the water should they fall. A quick Google search will detail many fatalities of this sad nature.

"I presented the facts of the case to a colleague, minus the 'unexplained' aspect, and asked him as a POLSA (a specialist police search advisor) to provide his thoughts on the search. The only area of interest to him was the river, with the possibility of Alex having gone into the water as the primary hypothesis – intentionally or accidentally; every other location and possibility was secondary.

"I suspect the conversation the police had with Alex's father was to tell him that, in all reasonable probability, Alex had gone into the river. I (also) suspect this was a fact withheld from the family to keep their hope alive.

"I'll admit this explanation is dull; I'd much rather think that Alex is sipping a pina colada on a beach in Puerto Rico after tripping through a portal. But in this case, his demise within the cold waters of the River Clyde is overwhelmingly likely.

"On the topic of dull explanations, another letter in the same issue of *FT*, from Nik Kelly, 'Bizarre Day-Dreams' [**FT448:65**], reminded me of a possible explanation that I have held for some years for PC Alan Godfrey's experience in 1980, and I am afraid this is a procedural one also. We know that PC Godfrey was on patrol in a police vehicle leading up to his experience.

"I wonder if his police vehicle might have been used previously to transport seized hallucinogenic drugs without the necessary precautions to safeguard against contamination. This came to mind when I observed the 'triple-bagging' of a bag containing these very substances, carried out by a CSI before transportation, to avoid this issue. At a time when less was known about the secondary contamination of these drugs, it's certainly a feasible explanation that fits very well.

"Given that I have been debunking things you have thrown my way, I would like to add, in the name of balance, that I absolutely believe in the reality of other fortean phenomena, including poltergeist activity; EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) which I think should get more credit than it currently gets as something unusual; and although I have no idea what the Paterson-Gimlin footage shows in Bluff Creek, California, in 1967, I am very confident that it is *not* a human in a (Bigfoot) suit."

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Duck tales

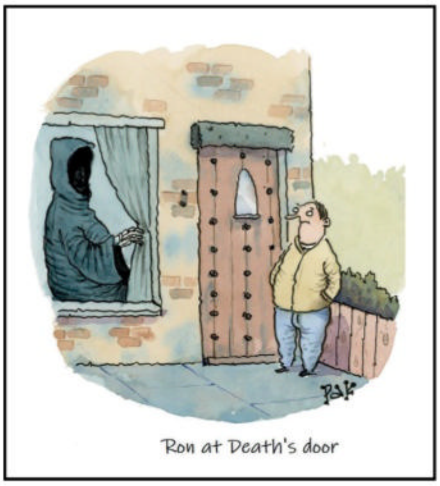
With regard to Chris Deighton's letter [**FT453:68**], yesterday evening [17 April] I found a duckling top trump card identical to the one he discovered (see photo). This one was also lying right in the middle of the pavement, with no sign of the rest of the pack, but the location in this instance was midway across the Itchen Bridge in Southampton.

Possibly each city in the UK is manifesting its own pack of 'baby animals' top trumps (with or without human intervention), like some kind of urban geomantic Pokémon.

Like Chris, I can presumably expect to be inundated with the remaining 29 cards, one by one, in increasingly unlikely and synchronistic ways.

Olly Stanford *Southampton, Hampshire*

LETTERS
DUCK (DUCKLING)
TOP TRUMPS QUIZ
DID YOU KNOW?
Ducks' feathers are waterproof thanks to their waxy coating.
SIZE 1
CUTENESS 10
MISCHIEF 2
LOYALTY 1
Collectable cards
I have a particular interest in weirdness found in every day
golf ball. They vary greatly in



Ron at Death's door

PETER A KING

READER INFO

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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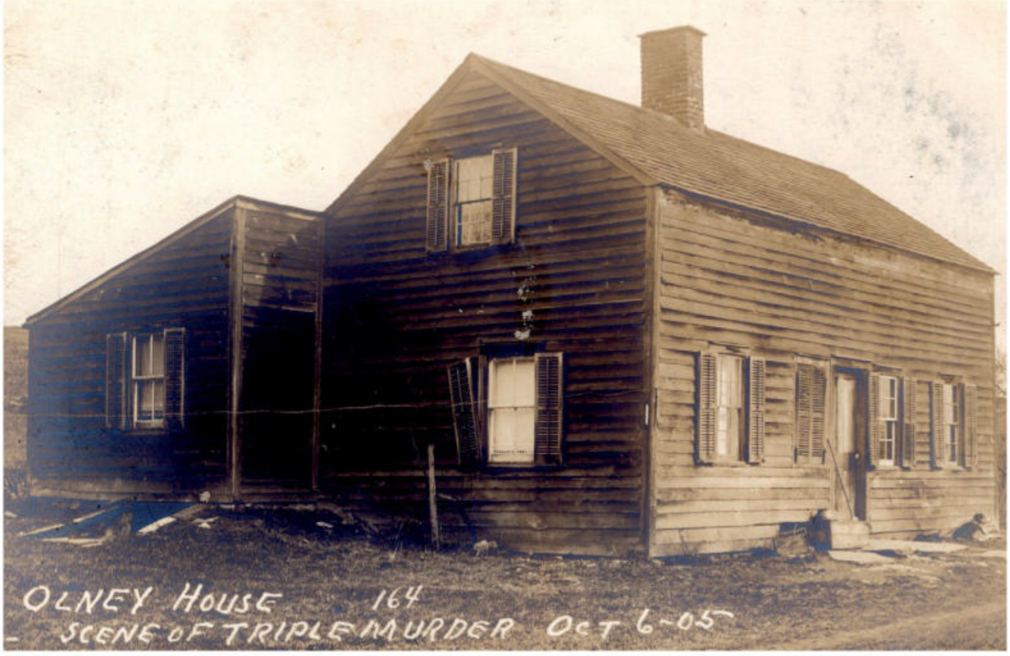
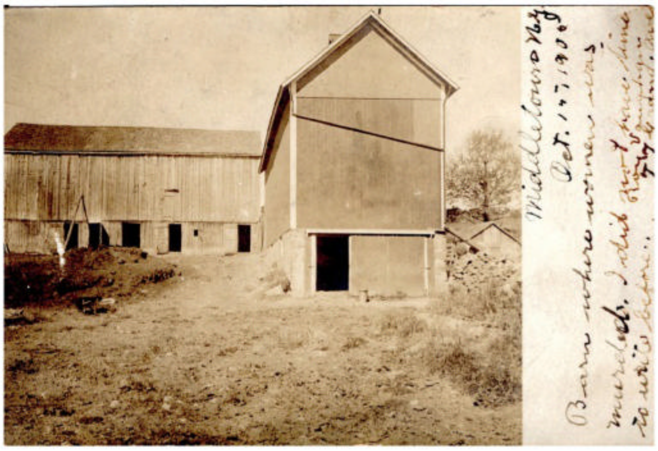
PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past recounts the story of a brutal triple murder and a postcard-worthy doggy detective.

54. AN AMERICAN DOG OF MURDER





LEFT: The Olney farmhouse, scene of the murder of blameless young Alice Ingerick. **BELOW LEFT**: A postcard of the murder barn where Mrs Ingerick was found, stamped and posted in October 1905, when it was thought the badly battered woman would not survive.

In 1905, the brothers Willis and Fred Olney were living at a comfortable farmhouse near Middletown, New York, sharing the house with their housekeeper Mrs Georgia Ingerick, her two daughters and a sheepdog called Ring. The farm had 101 acres and a fine dairy herd, supporting the two parsimonious Olney brothers with ease. On the morning of 6 October, Fred Olney took Mrs Ingerick's eldest daughter Lulu to see a friend of hers. When he did not return to take her back home, Lulu got worried and contacted their neighbour, Dan Davis.

Finding the Olney farm deadly still, with no person answering his frantic calls, Davis broke into the house. He was horrified to find the nine-year-old Alice Ingerick at the foot of the stairs, with her skull crushed. The dog Ring was the only living creature in the house. There was a working telephone at the farm and Davis made use of it to call the Middletown police. In Willis Olney's room, a leather trunk had been opened and the money and valuables taken. In the cellar was found a length of gas pipe wrapped in a bloody newspaper, most likely the murder weapon. In one of the barns, the constables heard a groaning sound from underneath a pile of hay: it was the badly bruised Mrs Ingerick, who had been beaten with the gas pipe until she was well-nigh dead.

The following morning, the police got the bright idea to let out the dog Ring, to see if he could sniff out his master. Loud barking from a clump of bushes announced the success of this stratagem: it turned out that both the Olney brothers had been shot dead with a revolver, and left on the ground after their pockets had been turned inside out and their watches stolen. The case was now one of triple murder.

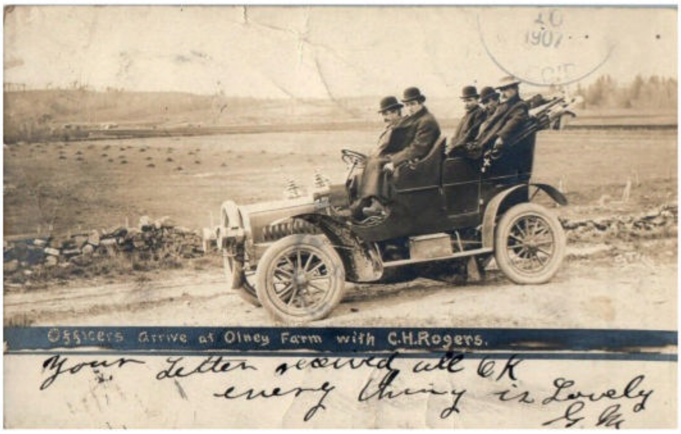
Initially, the Middletown police took charge of the murder investigation themselves, as well as they could. Mrs Ingerick had previously worked for an old hermit named Alanson Graham, who lived not far away, and the girl Lulu had heard him make threats against her. Graham turned out to be completely innocent, however. Dan Davis and his wife were both held in prison all night, in the vain hope that they knew more about the murders than they had divulged. Two men had been seen nearby in a farm wagon, but they came forward to be identified.

There was excitement when Mrs Ingerick regained consciousness a few days after the assault, but she could only answer questions by nodding or shaking her head. When asked by the foolish policemen whether it had been Fred Olney who had attacked her, she shook her head emphatically.

A drunken farmhand named Milton Cuddeback was next arrested, but he stubbornly denied any involvement and there was no evidence against him, except that he had approached his employer and said that he had heard six reports from a gun near the Olney farm. Martin Ingerick, the estranged husband of Mrs Ingerick, was

"Ring"
Olney Bro's
~Faithful Dog.~

Ring the Olney Dog


20
1907
Officers Arrive at Olney Farm with C.H.Rogers.
Your Letter received all OK
every thing is Lovely
G. R

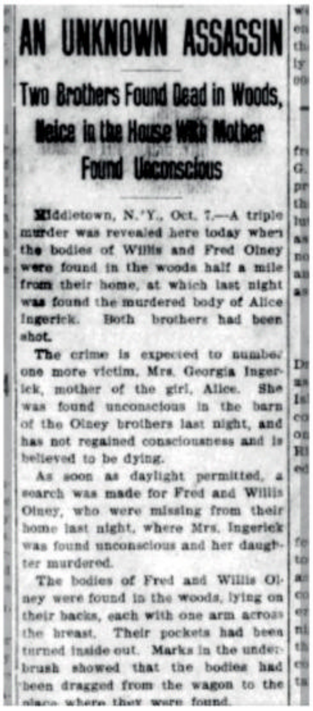
ABOVE: Two postcards showing Ring, the Dog of Murder. **LEFT**: A postcard showing Charles H Rogers in the custody of police officers, stamped and posted in 1907 and informing the recipient that "every thing is lovely". **BELOW LEFT**: A story about the Middletown murder from the Californian *Press Democrat*, 8 October 1905.

also investigated, but he came forward to clear himself. After these multiple arrests of innocent people, the Pinkerton detective agency was allowed to take over the case. They realised that the triple murderer was clearly a local resident who knew the Olneys were wealthy people and that it might pay handsomely to murder and rob them. Now had any young and able-bodied local man left Middletown in a hurry after the murder? There was one: the railway motorman Charles Henry Rogers, who was known as a tough customer and who possessed a revolver. He became the prime suspect and the Pinkerton agency were looking for him far and wide, but America was a big place and Rogers a cunning operator, who knew how to avoid arrest.

There was immediate interest in the American newspapers when they heard of the Middletown sensation: after all, it was not every day there was a triple murder. Even the faraway *Edinburgh Evening News* had a brief paragraph about the murders. In the American papers, the Middletown police were harshly criticised for their clumsy handling of the murder investigation, whereas the Pinkerton agency kept their investigation closely secret.

In December 1905, there was a sensation at the Orange County Surrogate's Court when the nephew Frederick Olney, who lived on a farm nearby, was appointed administrator to the estate of his uncle, but a certain George Olney, who claimed to be another nephew, brought an action to remove him. There were also attorneys present representing Mrs Mary O Noble, said to be a sister of the murdered men, who had been discovered in the Buffalo State Hospital after having been confined there for 23 years.

The postcard industry greeted the Middletown triple murder with enthusiasm



AN UNKNOWN ASSASSIN

Two Brothers Found Dead in Woods, Neice in the House With Mother Found Unconscious

Middletown, N. Y., Oct. 7.—A triple murder was revealed here today when the bodies of Willis and Fred Olney were found in the woods half a mile from their home, at which last night was found the murdered body of Alice Ingerick. Both brothers had been shot.

The crime is expected to number one more victim, Mrs. Georgia Ingerick, mother of the girl, Alice. She was found unconscious in the barn of the Olney brothers last night, and has not regained consciousness and is believed to be dying.

As soon as daylight permitted, a search was made for Fred and Willis Olney, who were missing from their home last night, where Mrs. Ingerick was found unconscious and her daughter murdered.

The bodies of Fred and Willis Olney were found in the woods, lying on their backs, each with one arm across the breast. Their pockets had been turned inside out. Marks in the underbrush showed that the bodies had been dragged from the wagon to the place where they were found.

The postcard industry also greeted the Middletown triple murder with enthusiasm: there was a card of the murder farm, another of the barn where Mrs Ingerick had been found, and at least three different cards of Ring, the Dog of Murder.

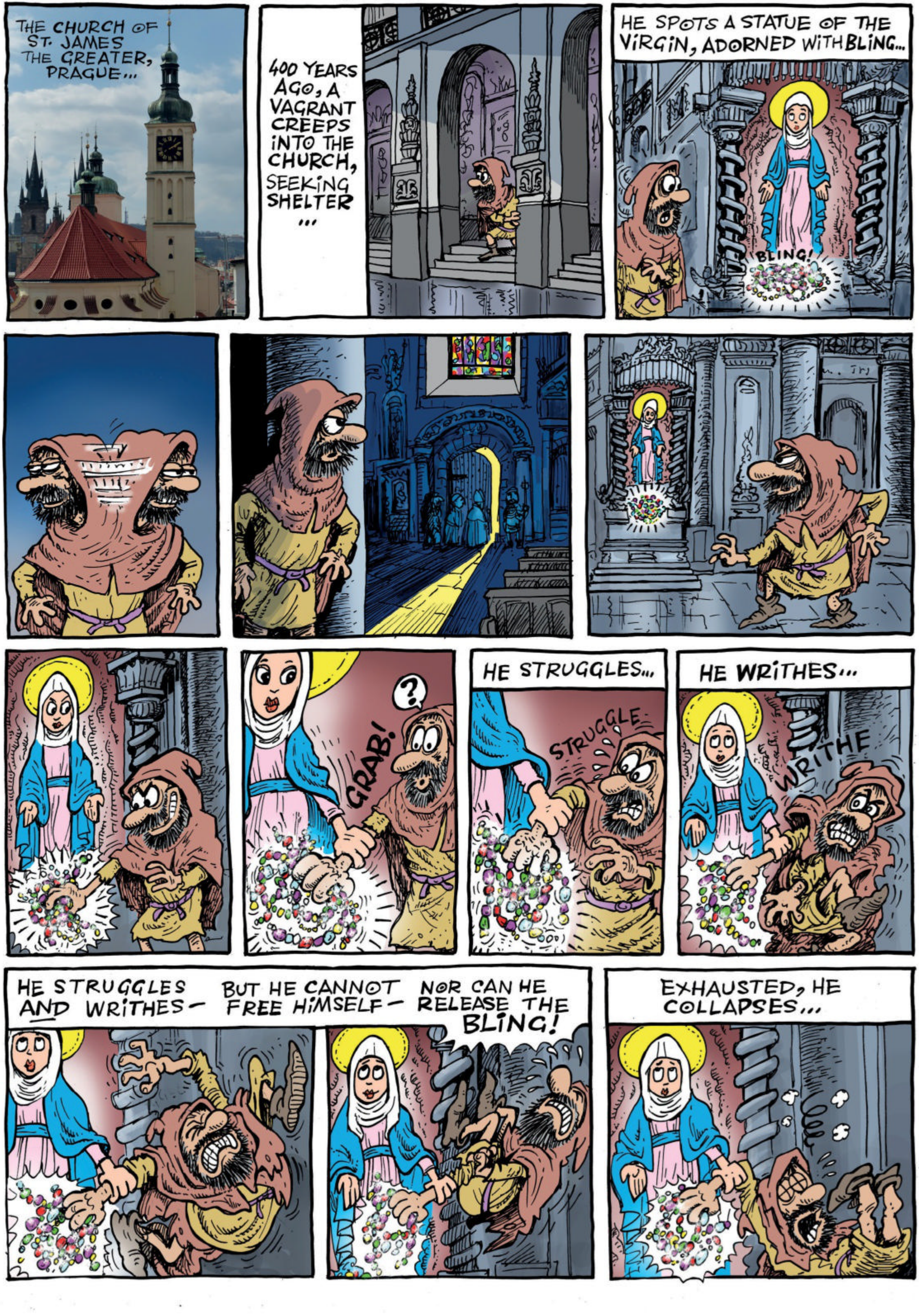
Although the Pinkerton agency used to boast that they always got their man, the cunning Charles Henry Rogers would keep one step ahead of them for many months to come. But in April 1907, a Middletown post office boy named George C Rogers was amusing himself by opening and reading some of the letters left in his care. One of them turned out to be addressed to the family of Charles Henry Rogers, containing the information that the sender was now working as a porter in a hotel at Madera, California, under the name Charles H Carpenter. Since the office boy had heard the rumours implicating Rogers in the Middletown triple murder, he went straight to the squad of detectives, who greeted his important discovery with interest. A team of Pinkerton men were dispatched to Madera, but it turned out that 'Carpenter' had quit his job and left town. But the detectives did not give up. Suspecting that Rogers was hiding in Los Angeles, they sent a decoy letter there, addressed to 'Charles H Carpenter' and stood ready to arrest Rogers when he came to pick it up.

Dismayed to be apprehended after more than 17 months on the run, and incarcerated in Goshen Prison, he told the detectives about his miserable life, living off odd jobs and constantly looking over his shoulder. Having lost much weight while on the run, he was eating heartily from the prison 'grub'. Rogers had once answered an advertisement in a matrimonial magazine, offering to marry a wealthy widow, but this did not come off as planned. "Say," this extraordinary malefactor grinned at the detectives, "If you had seen her, Goshen jail is better than being married to that!" Unwisely, he also made a confession, telling how he had gunned down and robbed the Olney brothers, before killing the girl and ransacking the house, and attacking Mrs Ingerick in the barn. She had survived his brutal attack and was still alive when Rogers went to trial in October 1907.

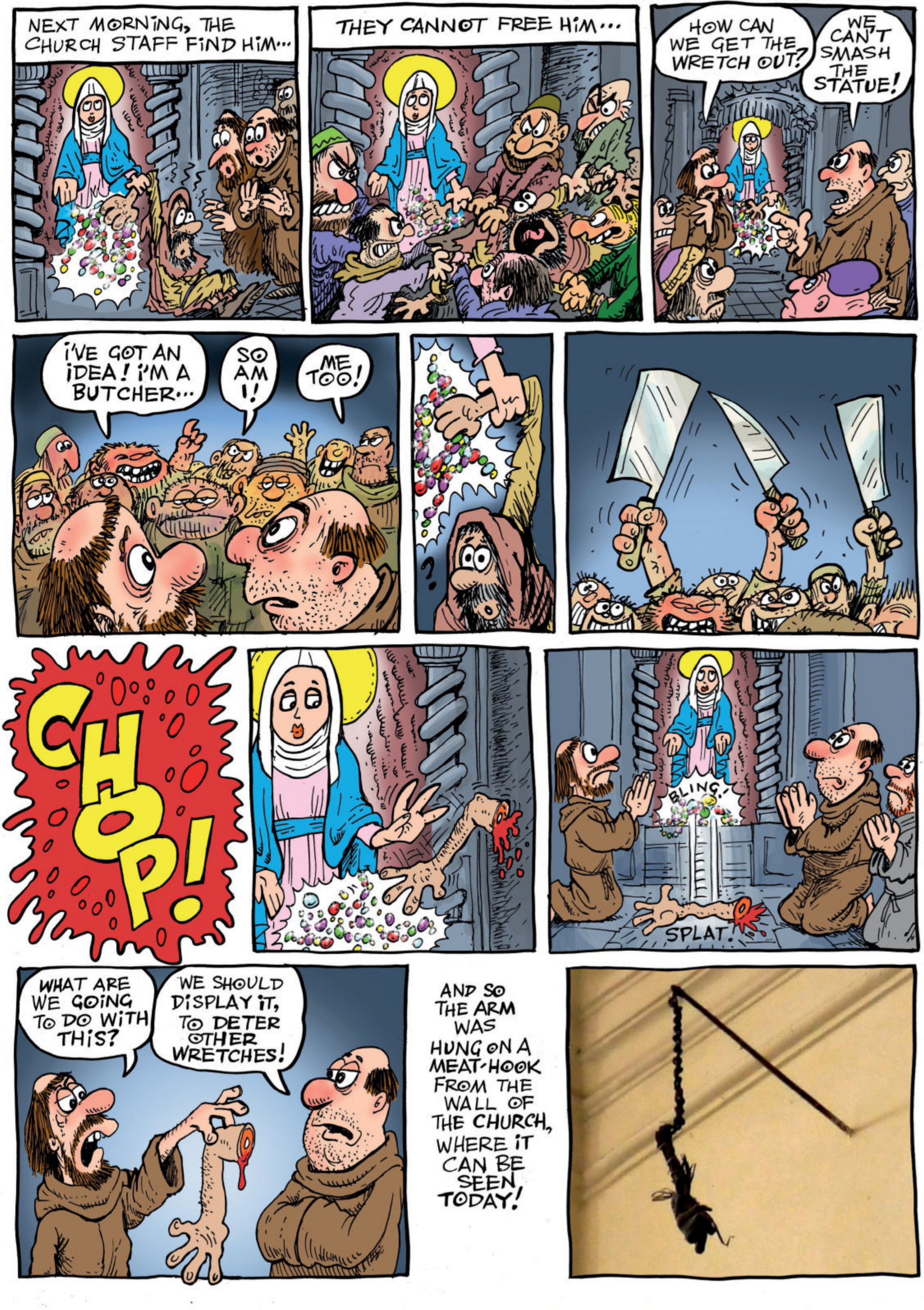
Found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, Rogers faced the electric chair at Sing Sing on 20 July 1908. As the electrodes were attached to the trembling limbs of the wretched prisoner, and Old Sparky was made ready for its lethal purpose, did the Middletown Dog of Murder give a mighty yell to herald his passing, as dogs howl for the dead?

PHENOMENOMIX

THE THIEF'S ARM OF PRAGUE


THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE GREATER, PRAGUE...
400 YEARS AGO, A VAGRANT CREEPS INTO THE CHURCH, SEEKING SHELTER ...
HE SPOTS A STATUE OF THE VIRGIN, ADORNED WITH BLING...
BLING!
GRAB!
?
HE STRUGGLES...
STRUGGLE
HE WRITHES...
WRITHE
HE STRUGGLES AND WRITHES—
BUT HE CANNOT FREE HIMSELF—
NOR CAN HE RELEASE THE BLING!
EXHAUSTED, HE COLLAPSES...

HUNT EMERSON and ROB GANDY


NEXT MORNING, THE CHURCH STAFF FIND HIM...
THEY CANNOT FREE HIM...
HOW CAN WE GET THE WRETCH OUT?
WE CAN'T SMASH THE STATUE!
I'VE GOT AN IDEA! I'M A BUTCHER...
SO AM I!
ME TOO!
?
CHOP!
BLING!
SPLAT!
WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THIS?
WE SHOULD DISPLAY IT, TO DETER OTHER WRETCHES!
AND SO THE ARM WAS HUNG ON A MEAT-HOOK FROM THE WALL OF THE CHURCH, WHERE IT CAN BE SEEN TODAY!

COMING
NEXT MONTH

UP IN SMOKE
THE CASE FOR SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION

THE COLOUR OF MAGIC
ITHELL COLQUHOUN: ARTIST AND OCCULTIST

+

LIVERPOOL LEPRECHAUNS,
A TRIP TO FROGGYLAND,
BROKEN VEIL,
AND MUCH MORE...

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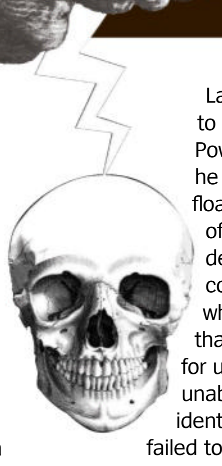
STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Davi Nunes Moreira,14, from Vitoria de Conquista in Brazil, was admitted to hospital after suffering from uncontrolled vomiting and losing the ability to walk, lingering for a week in excruciating pain before dying of multiple organ failure. Initially the cause of Moreira's illness remained mysterious, with doctors suspecting it could have been the result of an embolism, a blockage to a blood vessel, but then he admitted to crushing up a dead butterfly, mixing the remains with water and using a syringe to inject the concoction into his leg, beginning to feel ill shortly after. As a result, doctors are not sure what actually killed Moreira as no research has been done on what butterfly remains might do when injected into the human body. Although little is known about the exact chemical makeup of various butterfly species, most are not obviously toxic, but some, such as the Monarch butterfly, carry high levels of toxins from their diet. It is possible some kind of allergic reaction could have caused Moreira's death, or the foreign matter could have triggered sepsis. It is also unclear why he might have decided to inject butterfly remains into his leg in the first place; many reports have blamed a social media challenge for his actions, but the closest anyone has found merely involved encouraging people to draw butterfly-shaped designs on their bodies as a means of creative expression. *nypost.com, 19 Feb; vice.com, 20 Feb 2025.*

Spending an evening hanging out in the kitchen at his home in Kearns in Salt Lake County, Utah, Aston Mann, 23, and a friend smoked dope and talked about guns. During the banter, Mann's unnamed friend "said he could dodge a bullet", so they adjourned to the garage to put this to the test. They unloaded two guns, and to prove his point, Mann pointed them at his friend, who tried to "jump out of the way to prove he could move before the trigger was pulled". They did this six times, but according to police reports "the final time, the gun fired striking (his friend) in the chest". Mann immediately called emergency services and kept trying to revive his friend until paramedics arrived, but they found him unresponsive, and he was pronounced dead on arrival at a nearby hospital. As a result, Mann was charged with manslaughter and a firearms offense. *Metro.co.uk, 2 Feb 2025.*

Last October, police were called to the huge Claerwen Reservoir in Powys, Wales, by a walker who said he had seen a body in a wetsuit floating in the water. Specialist officers retrieved the heavily decayed corpse, while others combed the area for clues as to who he was. Forensics revealed that the man had been in the water for up to 12 weeks, but they were unable to throw any light on his identity as fingerprint and DNA tests failed to find any matches. The search of the reservoir shore had found no clothes or personal items that could belong to the deceased, nor did they find any vehicle that he could have used to reach the isolated body of water. It was four hours on foot to the nearest bus stop and police don't think he could have walked there in his wetsuit. Appeals to the public and searches of missing person reports have drawn a blank, even after Interpol were contacted in case the dead man was a foreign tourist. All that is known is that he was a white man, aged between 30 and 60, wearing a Zone 3 Agile wetsuit, a brand popular with triathletes and open water swimmers. Local resident Rosemary Stow said, "You don't see a lot of cars up at Claerwen dam or in the car park below, it is such a lonely place," adding, "People here are asking, has he been dumped there? But if he was dumped, why put him in a wetsuit?" Police think the man "entered the water voluntarily" sometime during the summer, saying that the Claerwen Reservoir is "not a known swimming area, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen." They are keeping an "open mind" as to what might have taken place. *BBC News, 22 Feb 2025.*

After suffering severe and painful toothache for two weeks, Leigh Rogers, 34, went to the dentist about it. Suspecting an abscess, they referred her to the University Hospital of North Durham, where she was examined by doctors and then sent for a CT scan to check for a potentially fatal bacterial infection. As part of this process, Rogers was injected with an iodine-based contrast dye to aid the imaging process, and immediately went into anaphylactic shock, having had a massive allergic reaction to the substance and, despite being in a hospital when this happened, could not be saved. About one per cent of patients suffer allergic reactions to contrast dye, but almost all are very minor, and deaths are exceptionally rare. *Sun, 24 Feb 2025.*

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